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Studies in European Cinema (SEC) provides an outlet for research into any aspect of European cinema and is unique in its interdisciplinary nature, celebrating the rich and diverse cultural heritage across the continent. The journal is distinctive in bringing together a range of European cinemas in one volume and in its positioning of the discussions within a range of contexts – the cultural, historical, textual, and many others.

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Gillespie, D. (2000), *Early Soviet Cinema: Innovation, Ideology and Propaganda*, London: Wallflower.
Hayward, S. (1993), *French National Cinema*, New York and Paris: Routledge.
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— (1985b), 'Über den nomadischen Umgang mit der Geschichte: Aspekte zu

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Kessler, F. and Warth, E. (2002), 'Early Cinema and its Audiences', in T. Bergfelder, E. Carter and D. Göktürk (eds), *The German Cinema Book*, London: BFI, pp. 121–28.
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Stone, R. (2002), *Spanish Cinema*, London: Longman.
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Introduction: 'Films without Frontiers'

Owen Evans and Elaine Canning *Swansea University*

In June 2006, some seventy speakers from UK institutions and international locations including New Zealand, Australia and the US attended the sixth annual European Cinema Research Forum (ECRF) at Swansea University. The variety of papers presented by established academics and postgraduate students was reflected in the thematic focus of panels which featured 'Dialogues within Europe', 'Dialogues with American Cinema', 'Performance and Representation' and 'Eastern European Cinema'. In addition, the inclusion of specialized sessions on music and adaptation generated considerations of topics such as adaptations of Zola in silent French films, rock music in the films of Wim Wenders and the influence of Paolo Conte on Ozon's *5x2*. The diversity of papers was complemented by a common enquiry into film's capacity to break boundaries or transcend frontiers, be it through transatlantic links, the fusion of media or the exploitation of thematic concerns such as transculturalism and multiculturalism. The essays which feature in this special edition engage with similar themes from varying perspectives and are representative of the critical debate generated by ECRF6. Focusing on Western and Eastern European cinema, they interrogate a number of topics including identity, masculinity and feminism as well as key concepts such as dialogue/discourse (transatlantic/visual), cinematography and spectatorial expectations.

In the first essay of this volume, Cristina Johnston assesses the fusion of French and American transnational and transatlantic identities in Jean Reno's screen personae. Jean Reno, she argues, has emerged as a Francophone all-American action hero who challenges transatlantic clichés. What is more, he establishes a transcultural discourse through on-screen associations with American stars including Tom Cruise, Matthew Broderick and Robert de Niro. Johnston investigates Reno's more positive and negative representations of otherness in *Mission: Impossible*, *Godzilla* and *Ronin*. She concludes that the films analysed in the course of her essay reveal 'a quiet action hero, whose parallel appeals to patriotism and popular cultural references embed him firmly within a transcultural and transatlantic dialogue'.

Johnston's transcultural exploration leads into Polona Petek's examination of multiculturalism and identity in 'Enabling Collisions: Re-thinking Multiculturalism through Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand/Head On*'. Specifically, Petek studies the relationship between the film soundtrack and multicultural bonding in *Head On*. Beginning with a review of the varying definitions of multiculturalism and its negative appraisal in academic circles,

Petek proposes a recuperation of the concept through the use of music in film. Her exposition of the hybrid nature of the principal protagonists' identities and the music itself generates discussion on multicultural relations and audience reception. Essentially, she claims that her case study 'seems perfectly capable of crossing the eroded internal as well as the tightened external borders of the European Union'.

Questions of border and gender link Petek's essay with the third article in this collection. In 'Gendered Discourses of Nation(hood) and the West in Polish Cinema', Joanna Rydzewska and Elzbieta Ostrowska explore the problematisation of Polish identity and Western relations in Morgenstern's *Good Bye, Til Tomorrow* . . . and Kieslowski's *Three Colours: White*. Considerations of Polish-Western romantic relationships and the historical and political backdrop of both films trigger a concern with male and female subject positions, role reversal, masculinity, East/West relations, otherness and difference. In the final analysis, the authors assert that 'the female metaphor of the West in Polish cinema visualizes the uneasy relationship between the unofficial desire for the West and the official repression of this desire, which, however, following Freud's dictum becomes the very substance of the Unconscious'.

Feminism and femininity form the focus of Daniela Cavallaro's investigation into the process of adaptation from page to screen by Italian film director Sofia Scandurra. Considering, firstly, the production problems faced by an all-female crew and subsequently, the particular omissions and modifications of the source material, as well as reviewers' comments and audience reception, Cavallaro debates whether *Io Sono Mia* can be classified fundamentally as a feminist film.

In her study of Bigas Luna's *Bilbao*, Abigail Loxham addresses notions of cinematic identity, spectatorial expectations and haptic and visual discourse. Employing the theories of Laura Marks and Giuliana Bruno, Loxham probes the relationship of the principal protagonist Leo with his city, Barcelona, and his prostitute, Bilbao through focus on the significance of haptic space, movement, tactile vision and 'tactile blindness'. Bigas Lunas' innovative use of cinematic language and deconstruction of established filmic practice enables him to set up a metaphorical link between Leo and Spain in the late 1970s. In her final remarks, the author claims that *Bilbao* is representative 'of the way in which Spain's cinematic production began to seep beyond traditional and accepted cinematic practice to embrace alternative representational methods'.

The final essay in this volume by Ian Roberts likewise ponders cinematic practice and novel filmic techniques in an enquiry into the films of German director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau. Furthermore, in line with Cristina Johnston, Roberts contemplates transatlantic links, that is 'transatlantic thresholds', to use the author's terminology. By taking into account a range of Murnau's films, including *Walk in the Night*, his first surviving film and *Sunrise*, a Fox production, Roberts discusses how Murnau went beyond mere 'filmed theatre' to display a complex use of the

camera. Roberts proposes that 'it is in the field of technical tricks that Murnau's real contribution to film on both sides of the Atlantic begins'. He pays particular attention to Murnau's mastery of the 'unchained camera' and postulates that Murnau can be categorized simultaneously as a pioneer of technical innovations and a master of his craft.

Ultimately, as the authors of this volume tease out more subversive readings of stars and filmic texts, they question whether film can truly reject, break and/or challenge literal and metaphorical frontiers. It is an engaging debate, and one which raged throughout the conference from which these contributions were taken, and one which the European Cinema Research Forum and *Studies in European Cinema* will surely continue to chronicle and provoke.

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Saving Robert de Niro: Jean Reno as Francophone all-American action hero*

Cristina Johnston *University of Stirling*

Abstract

This article examines the complexities of both French and American transnational identities as portrayed on screen by Jean Reno. The particular elements of French and American culture and identity at the heart of Reno's roles in three films (Mission: Impossible, Godzilla, and Ronin) are analysed in order to illustrate that, although feeding on national and cultural stereotype, Reno's screen persona does not merely engage with a binary opposition between French anti-Americanism and American francophobia but rather is inescapably in dialogue with both Atlantic coasts. This transcultural exchange is further discussed through analysis of Reno's onscreen relationship with the major American box office stars of these three films, namely Tom Cruise, Matthew Broderick, and Robert de Niro. What emerges from this analysis is a multilayered, transnational star persona, at once embedded in and breaking with transatlantic clichés.

Keywords

Jean Reno
transnationalism
transculturalism
Mission: Impossible
Léon
Godzilla

Since his title role in *Léon* (Besson 1994), the Moroccan-born French actor Jean Reno has carved out an unusual niche for himself as a Francophone all-American hero.¹ This identity has enabled him simultaneously to embody and mock a series of transatlantic clichés in action movies and comedies alike. The focus in this article will be placed on the Hollywood action films in which Reno has appeared, taking as a starting point a trio of films released in the latter half of the 1990s: *Mission: Impossible* (De Palma 1996), *Godzilla* (Emmerich 1998) and *Ronin* (Frankenheimer 1998). The article will analyse the complexities of both the French and American transnational and transatlantic identities which are constructed, examining the ways in which the screen persona that emerges is inescapably in dialogue with both Atlantic coasts, rather than engaging with a simplistic binary backdrop of French anti-Americanism, on the one hand, and American francophobia, on the other. This transcultural dialogue is further developed through Reno's onscreen relationship with the major American box office stars of the three films focused on here: Tom Cruise in *Mission: Impossible*, Matthew Broderick in *Godzilla*, and Robert De Niro whose life Reno ultimately saves in *Ronin*. What emerges is a multilayered screen persona, transnational insofar as it 'deliberately blend[s] nations and cultures, rather than erasing cultural specificity' (Vanderschelden 2007: 38) and at once embedded in, and breaking with, transatlantic clichés.

* A version of this paper was given at the European Cinema Research Forum at the University of Wales in Swansea in July 2006 and the author would like to thank conference participants and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on early drafts. Thanks also to Florian Grandena, Kerri Woods, and students on Stirling University's 'Transatlantic Cinemas' course for their insightful comments and feedback.

1 Reno was, in fact, born to Spanish parents in Morocco. However, he left Morocco in 1968 'to enlist in the French army because

national service was mandatory to obtain French citizenship' (Barkham 2007) and subsequently studied drama in Paris.

- 2 Figures taken from www.imdb.com. Accessed 10 August 2006.

According to the *New York Daily News*, Reno's breakthrough on American screens became 'inevitable' (Beale 1998) after his popular success in a string of increasingly high profile roles in each of Luc Besson's 1980s films: *Le Dernier Combat* (1983), *Subway* (1985), *Le Grand Bleu/The Big Blue* (1988) and *Nikita* (1990). It was this last role, as a professional hit man in *Nikita*, which led to his first real US breakthrough in Besson's 1994 work *Léon*. Here Reno reprises his role as hitman, the eponymous Léon, but he shifts from peripheral figure to melancholic central character in a French-financed but English-language production, starring alongside Gary Oldman and Natalie Portman, in her debut role. *Léon* took over 5 million dollars in its opening weekend in the United States, with more than 3 million spectators going to see it over the course of its French release.² It laid the foundations for the 'action hero outsider' role Reno has gone on to make his own.

Indeed, although Léon is, in some ways, very much the average gun-toting action hero, his is not the stereotypical 'hard bodied' action figure identified by Susan Jeffords (1993). Reno's Léon is a somewhat taciturn, but highly dependable, hired killer, whose life changes when his young neighbour Mathilda (Portman) comes home to find her family has been murdered by a gang of corrupt police officers led by the unhinged Stansfield (Oldman). Mathilda takes it upon herself to become Léon's ward and pseudo-apprentice, keen to learn the tricks of his trade in order to exact revenge. Throughout the film, Léon is repeatedly shown exercising but, despite the camera's focus on the physicality of his performance, Reno's body is not the chiselled, well-toned physique of a Stallone or a Van Damme. Rather, as Lucy Mazdon (2000: 111) has pointed out, attention is drawn to his clothing, and more precisely to the fact that his clothes seem ill-fitting and serve primarily to underline the awkwardness of Reno's shape. He wears braces over his vests and t-shirts, his trousers are too short, and his overcoat too big, hanging off a somewhat bulky frame, indicating the possibility of physical vulnerability and imperfection.

Similarly, while other action heroes of the late 1980s and early 1990s are depicted as seductive figures – both within the narrative and in terms of star persona – Reno's charms are only shown to work on a 12-year-old girl. Indeed, although Besson has repeatedly stated that any sexual interpretations of this relationship are purely in the minds of the critics, aspects of the Mathilda–Léon relationship were edited out of the film, on its initial US release, because they were considered inappropriate (Humbert 2003: 87). Certainly, it is unconventional for the only potential hint of romance or physical attraction in an action film to stem from a relationship between a grown man and a female child. Abele, for instance, draws attention to the fact that Bruce Willis's action heroes 'generally end [their] films in the arms of a woman or a child' (Abele 2002: 449), underlining a key distinction between the roles played in action films by these two groups. The child, in such circumstances, is an innocent saved by the action hero, while it is only from the adult woman that romance or the potential for sexual fulfilment can be drawn.

This is not to say that Léon and Mathilda's relationship, and, in particular, Mathilda's expression thereof, goes without comment in Besson's film. They are forced to leave a hotel they were staying in, for example, when Mathilda deliberately leads the clerk to believe that the two are sexually involved. However, Léon's role as protector is one he adopts reluctantly and at no time is the viewer led to believe that he may have an ulterior sexual motive for his involvement with the girl. Indeed, the relationship can perhaps be understood more clearly if one takes into consideration Besson's assertion – naïve or otherwise – that the characters are actually 'both 12 years old in their minds' (Jobson 2000).

Returning to considerations of a transatlantic dialogue, we can see the ways in which *Léon* begins to lay the foundations for Reno's subsequent unusual transatlantic persona. He plays an action hero and, although he is not explicitly 'outed' as a French immigrant, visually he is associated with Mediterranean cultures. The contact who looks after his money and issues him with instructions for contracts is an Italian-American and the film's opening sequence clearly locates the action in Little Italy. However, despite any popular association there might be between either action heroes or Mediterranean males and romantic seduction, Reno's persona remains almost asexual throughout. Mathilda's attentions merely make him embarrassed, spitting out mouthfuls of milk – his favoured beverage – and frequently becoming tongue-tied.

This is not a smooth-talking Mediterranean gigolo, in the mould of, for instance, Reno's compatriot Vincent Cassel either in *Ocean's Twelve* (Soderbergh 2004) or, indeed, as the voice of a lecherous Monsieur Hood in *Shrek* (Adamson and Jenson 2001). Rather, what we are dealing with here is a far more awkward figure – strong and silent, and yet not the 'strong *but* silent' type. Léon is explicitly constructed as an outsider in terms of the American setting, but, with the Little Italy location, he is an outsider within a realm of other outsiders, peripheral both to and within the peripheries, and yet still engaging with aspects of the mythology of the all-American action hero. Léon's hits are fellow gangsters, he works according to a strict 'no women, no kids' policy, he works alone yet agrees to protect the endangered female lead. Were it not for the fact that his job involves murder, Léon would, in many ways, represent the ideal newcomer to the United States. Diligent, loyal, trustworthy, and caring, he demonstrates what Elizabeth Abele (2002: 447) has described as the action hero's 'total identification with his duty'. Indeed, any reluctance Léon initially expressed with regard to his suitability as mentor for Mathilda is quickly superseded by his desire to ensure her safety at any cost.

In terms of action films, his role in *Léon* was followed by the three key parts which form the focus of analysis here: *Mission: Impossible*, *Godzilla*, and *Ronin*. It is important to note at this stage that all three of these films were released before the events of September 11. They also predate the diplomatic spat between the United States and France, centring around the second Gulf War conflict of 2003, at which point 'France joined the

ranks of countries subjected to a campaign of widespread bashing from the American population' (Vaïsse 2003: 34). The unconventional Francophone action hero Reno creates across these works is one which was able to emerge in a pre-9/11 transatlantic world, in a way that is, perhaps, much more difficult to imagine post-9/11.

Taking the three roles in turn, it is perhaps in *Mission: Impossible* that Reno comes closest to embodying a character whose otherness translates into a negative representation. Here Reno plays Franz Krieger, a shady character who is taken on, along with his partner, by Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise), in order to help him gain (illegal) access to the CIA headquarters at Langley, from where Hunt needs to steal computer data. Reno and Cruise are shown crawling along air ducts together and Cruise is then obliged to put his life in Reno's hands as he is suspended in mid-air on a rope held only by an ever-sweatier Reno. It is perhaps no surprise here, in terms of Hollywood's traditional depiction of foreign others in action films, that Reno's character should be constructed as a figure of suspicion. Initially, we are given no explicit reason to mistrust him but Reno's behaviour in this sequence is clearly designed to ensure that the viewer begins to see his presence as implying a degree of diegetic threat to the American star. In terms of star personae, we have the untouchable Cruise, who has already been betrayed within the narrative framework and is trying to right a wrong, placing his faith in a character who is shown to have the potential for physical weakness. Whereas Cruise appears sleek, precise, and graceful, Reno again looks awkward, straining and sweating unesthetically as he grips the rope – contrast this, for example, with the way in which the beads of sweat form delicately on the rim of Cruise's glasses – and sneezing in response to the arrival of a rat in the air duct, thus provoking Cruise's rapid fall towards the floor.

It is the foreign other who proves himself to be untrustworthy. We are also clearly shown that, while Cruise can rely on physical skill and wit to get him out of awkward situations, Reno is forced to resort to brute strength and violence. Cruise ultimately survives the drop and is unceremoniously hauled out of the room. However, as the operation reaches its end, a moment of inattention from Reno results in his knife falling back into the room, landing – point first – in the desk and leaving an undeniable sign of their presence. As the film reaches its climax, our initial suspicions are confirmed. Reno turns out to have been working with the agent who betrayed Cruise in the first place. The knife which falls into the room was responsible for killing a member of Cruise's team in the initial betrayal, and a key section of the film's climax involves Reno piloting a helicopter into the Channel Tunnel, ultimately bringing about his own death by concentrating on an attempt to kill Cruise, rather than ensuring his own safe exit from the tunnel. The untrustworthy other thus receives his due come-uppance and Reno's onscreen persona comes closer than ever before to being a straightforwardly francophobe creation.

However, as much as his role in *Mission: Impossible* might appear to conform to stereotypes of foreign other as nefarious force, what is interesting

about Reno is that this constitutes the exception, rather than the rule. As he has continued his career in Hollywood action films, his persona has moved beyond this stereotype into a more complex engagement with the transcultural dialogue begun in *Léon*. Indeed, in terms of cinematic mythologies, a reading can be constructed according to which Reno, as well as paying the price onscreen for his attempt on the life of Tom Cruise, has also more than paid his dues to US popular culture in subsequent roles. Having started his American film career with a role which saw him as protector to the actress who would go on to mother Luke Skywalker,³ Reno redeems himself following the attempt on Cruise's life by going on to save New York⁴ from a giant lizard in *Godzilla* and picking a bullet out of Robert De Niro's side in *Ronin*. It is to these two films that we will now turn.

On the surface *Godzilla* may appear to be little more than a silly monster movie: Godzilla is pregnant and seeks out New York as suitable nesting ground, destroying skyscrapers and killing umpteen New Yorkers along the way. The US military are, inevitably, valiant in their attempts to destroy the beast. However, geeky scientist Dr. Niko Tatopoulos (Broderick), with assistance from French secret agent Philippe Roaché (Reno), ultimately saves the day. In terms of a transatlantic relationship, what is interesting here is that Godzilla is explicitly constructed as a creature for which the French are responsible. French nuclear testing in the Pacific has resulted in the genetic mutation that is Godzilla and, although he initially poses as an insurance man, Reno's character is actually an employee of the French government sent to find a solution to the problems caused by his employer.⁵ So while, on the one hand, France is explicitly named as a destructive force, it is nevertheless given an opportunity to redeem its mistakes through the onscreen persona of Jean Reno. And it is important to note that Reno's character plays his part here by appealing to American popular culture and traditional American values throughout.

His Frenchness, however, is repeatedly underlined, most frequently through references to the poor quality coffee Reno's colleagues persist in offering him. The fact that the coffee is particularly foul in comparison to its French equivalent, is spelled out in one incident which sees Reno complaining that his colleague had promised him French coffee, only for the colleague to respond – in subtitled French, a cinematic indicator of linguistic otherness – that the tin read 'French blend'. Similarly, when presented with another cup of foul-tasting coffee by a colleague, Reno asks 'You call this coffee?', to which his colleague equally sarcastically retorts, 'I call this America.' However, rather than lapsing into a somewhat facile gastronomic contest between the two countries, with America the home of fast food and France home to gourmet cuisine, Emmerich constructs a more complex reading of the relationship which, as Verdaguer (2004: 444) points out, does not impede cultural compatibility between the French and American characters onscreen.

This complexity manifests itself in a number of ways and in relation to a series of cultural references. Broderick is fired by the military because he

- 3 Nathalie Portman plays Queen Amidala in *Star Wars: Episode I The Phantom Menace* (Lucas 1999), *Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones* (Lucas 2002) and *Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas 2005).
- 4 New York is introduced not only as a geographical location in Emmerich's film, but also explicitly as a site of culture. When the film's action shifts to the city, the caption across the bottom of the screen reads: 'The City That Never Sleeps', a direct reference to the lyrics of 'New York, New York' written by Kamber and Ebb.
- 5 We find here an illustration of a tendency identified by Justin Vaisse in his 2003 article on American francophobia whereby France becomes a scapegoat for America's own failures. Responsibility for the existence of Godzilla lies squarely at the door of successive French governments who have carried out nuclear testing in the South Pacific and yet no reference whatsoever is made to American nuclear testing, nor indeed to the dropping of atomic bombs by America on Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

6 It should be noted that, although the focus of this article is on Jean Reno as 'Francophone all-American action hero', Broderick's character's name is also a clear indicator that his origins lie outwith American national boundaries leading to possible interpretations according to which the nation, in essence, is rescued by two heroic outsiders. However, Broderick's Dr. Tatopoulos is clearly a Greek-American, speaking English with an American accent, and with absolutely no reference – visual or spoken – made to his family background beyond the name.

inadvertently leaks information to an ex-girlfriend who works as a journalist, and he finds himself teaming up with Reno. Their collaboration gets off to a shaky start as Reno kidnaps Broderick, before taking him to the French HQ which is shown to house an impressive array of weapons and ammunition. Broderick looks bemused and asks how they managed to get it into the country, to which Reno replies, with a soft, self-satisfied smirk, 'This is America, you can buy anything.' Again, we have the outsiders being constructed as a potential source of danger or threat, and yet, actually, all they have done is make cunning use of an existent American sub-culture. Reno's amusement at Broderick's question speaks volumes about the impression of American society which is being created, the ultimate consumer society, but one in which goody-two-shoes characters like Broderick's scientist are able to go about their daily lives unaware of the underside of this die-hard consumerism. Reno and his colleagues are shown to be cunning, but their cunning does not pose a threat. Rather, it is being brought into play in order to save the city, and, by extension, the country and the way of life from the threat posed by Godzilla's arrival.

Again, we see in Reno a hero who is blind to anything but his duty and whose patriotism, here, unfolds in parallel in relation to both sides of the Atlantic. Reno declares himself a patriot and explains to Broderick that sometimes this patriotism means he must 'save my country from mistakes it has made itself.' In this way, he at once appeals to the sense of patriotism traditionally associated with the all-American action hero, while making clear that this type of national pride is not uniquely an American domain. The appeal is rewarded by Broderick's character's decision to work with the foreign other, jokingly – but only half-jokingly – stating that he has always wanted to work for the French Foreign Legion. Again, we are dealing here in the currency of cultural imagery. The bravery and the patriotism of the Foreign Legion are recognised by the American scientist (Greek-American, to be specific), in exchange for Reno's recognition of his country's errors coupled with his desire to see France's reputation restored.⁶

In order to destroy Godzilla, it becomes necessary for Reno, Broderick, and their men to con their way through the US military checkpoints and here, again, Reno makes an explicit appeal to key aspects of American popular culture. Reno is shown inspecting his troops, and, before the somewhat bemused gaze of Broderick, distributing a single stick of chewing gum to each man. The agents, dressed in ill-fitting US army uniforms, proceed to chew their sticks of gum, with jaws hanging open, producing a chorus of gum and saliva. When Broderick asks what purpose the gum serves, Reno replies, straightforwardly, that it 'makes us look more American'. From Broderick's response – he immediately says he should do all the talking – it is obvious that the viewers are not supposed to be convinced by this display of 'Americanism'. However, it points towards a very specific image of America that Reno and his men have obviously integrated. With their helmets, uniforms, and gum, German-born Emmerich gives viewers a visual reminder of the arrival of American GIs in Paris at the end of

the Occupation, and yet the imagery does not lend itself entirely to this straightforward decoding. Rather, we have something far more complex, namely French government agents doing a poor impersonation of American soldiers, in an attempt to trick their way back into New York, in order to liberate the city from the monstrous presence of the lizard.

Rather than Reno's Frenchness alone constituting a source of amusement or indeed bemusement, it is the ways in which he brings France and French identity into dialogue with America and American identity which are interesting here. The poor but amusing impersonation of US soldiers continues when the agents' jeeps arrive at the checkpoint and Reno is asked where they are heading. Thus far, we have only heard him speak English with a very recognisably French accent and yet suddenly, here, the words that come out of his constantly chewing lips, are intoned with an accent that is unmistakably modelled on Elvis Presley. Reno has very little to say, but the reference is inescapable and, when they succeed in passing the checkpoint, he turns to the ever more wide-eyed Broderick and offers, by way of explanation, 'Elvis Presley films. He was The King.' So the Americans may not know the first thing about how to make a good cup of coffee – or, indeed, that such good cups of coffee should be accompanied by croissants, not donuts – and American English may, to foreign ears, sound as though it is being garbled through mouths filled with chewing gum, but Elvis Presley is rock 'n' roll, an untouchable cultural icon who requires no further explanation. This meshing of cultural references further builds on Reno's action hero persona. He is at once transatlantic, and thus dependent on distinctions between French and American cultures (coffee and croissants versus chewing gum, for instance), and transnational with Elvis, and, by extension, iconic popular culture, serving as a bridge between the two nations.

In our final film, Reno is granted a rare position within the iconography of Hollywood action heroes, as he takes centre-stage alongside Robert De Niro in *Ronin*. Reno is not a secondary figure here, but occupies the onscreen space as much as De Niro does, working very much in tandem with the American star. Again, Reno proves here that his Frenchness can do more than simply set him apart within Hollywood cinema, just as De Niro too, as Italian-American within Hollywood, can be said to have earned a central place in Hollywood iconography precisely by playing the role of the outsider.

Ronin is set in France – split between Paris, Nice and Arles – and centres around a complex heist, involving Irish and Russian terrorists and an attempt to recuperate a mysterious silver case. Reno and De Niro are part of a team of international criminals – Reno is French, De Niro plays an American – brought together to try to win possession of the case but, inevitably, their plans are foiled at various points along the way, in order to make way for Frankenheimer's trademark car chase sequences and action-packed shoot-outs. What is interesting here is that Reno is allowed to act as partner to De Niro in France, rather than in the United States.

This time it is De Niro who could, in fact, be constructed as the outsider, firstly, due to his involvement in criminal activities and, secondly, as the foreign other, but this is avoided. The criminality in itself is not depicted as a marker of otherness as it is not, for instance, placed within a 'criminal/police' binary, but rather the narrative unfolds within strata of a criminal world. As for the question of national otherness, the inclusion of a number of conversations between the two male stars conducted in subtitled French, rather than in English, shows that De Niro is able to adapt to his linguistic surroundings. He may be on foreign soil but, overall, De Niro is able to overcome his potential otherness.

Clearly, humorous misunderstandings resulting from this delicate linguistic imbalance would not be in keeping with the mood of the movie. However, it is important to note that the bilingualism of this central pairing is at no time constructed as a weakness, it does not place De Niro in a position of dependence but instead it serves to underline the solidarity that emerges between the two, as when their Irish employer issues instructions, the detail of which De Niro is unable to follow, but which are quickly translated by Reno. A transatlantic complicity is created here, the likes of which is not to be found in many – if indeed any – Hollywood action films. This is not the one-up-man-ship of Vincent Cassel and George Clooney in *Ocean's Twelve*, nor the vanity and arrogance of Lambert Wilson's exchanges with Keanu Reeves' Neo in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski Brothers 2003). Neither, indeed, is it the Gallic charm of Depardieu slowly, but surely, seducing Andie MacDowell in *Green Card* (Weir 1990). What we have in *Ronin* is a rare example of bilingual solidarity enabling a strengthened partnership to emerge without either of the nations represented feeling the need to take the upper hand.

This equal footing develops beyond a purely linguistic realm throughout the film, culminating in the sequence which sees Reno save De Niro's life. The latter is shot by one of Russian terrorists and it is Reno who drives him, bleeding profusely from his side, to the house of a friend, tucked away in rugged French countryside. Even here, however, it is not straightforwardly a case of Reno taking charge and singlehandedly saving De Niro. Rather, De Niro himself stays conscious throughout the makeshift operation and issues instructions to Reno, telling him where to cut, how to grasp the bullet, which direction to pull in order to extract it. It is only when the bullet is removed that De Niro shows any sign of weakness, asking Reno if he thinks he will be able to stitch him up on his own and saying he thinks he might just pass out. If we think back to Tom Cruise placing his life in Reno's untrustworthy hands in *Mission: Impossible*, the situation here is very different. As viewers, we have been given no reason to distrust Reno. Quite the contrary, in fact, since we have seen a respectful closeness developing between Reno and De Niro over the course of the film. Their closeness is particularly remarkable within the context of the international grouping of criminals involved in the operation. It becomes not only a transatlantic partnership situated on one side, or the other, of

the Atlantic, but a transatlantic partnership that is to be trusted above and beyond the potential for treachery exhibited by East Europeans (embodied by Stellan Skarsgård's ex-KGB East German), Britons (Sean Bean as a rather odious character who is, in fact, dismissed before the operation gets off the ground), and the Irish (as represented by Natasha McElhone as their main contact, and Jonathan Pryce as overall mastermind).

Bearing in mind the atypical transatlantic relationship between Reno and De Niro, and the evolution of the former's Hollywood persona since *Léon*, we can thus see that the dialogue between Atlantic coasts that Jean Reno represents is one which makes particular sense within a pre-9/11 context. Indeed, there is a rather gloomy irony in the fact that Godzilla's arrival in New York is described, at one point in the film, as the worst thing to happen to the city since the World Trade Centre bombings of 1993. It is difficult to imagine Reno's solitary action hero being allowed to continue his development in such close parallel with his American counterparts in the post-9/11 cinematic landscape, or indeed being accorded such a pivotal role in the rescue of aspects of American popular culture. 9/11 has been identified as a turning point in Franco-American relations evoking 'a renewed sense of patriotism [. . . has] been a driving force behind the recent spike of Francophobia' (Vaïsse 2003: 42) and it is only very recently that Reno has begun to creep back into any real prominence in Hollywood cinema with his roles in *The Da Vinci Code* (Howard 2006) and *The Pink Panther* (Levy 2006).

Nevertheless, starting with that initial role in *Léon*, Reno's relationship with Hollywood has differed from that of other French actors of his generation. His action hero's Frenchness is, at times, gently mocked, or used to provoke a sense of bemusement, but without constructing him simply as a figure of fun, and all the while allowing him to play a vital part in onscreen transatlantic rescue missions. He may be an outsider, but only insofar as he is obliged to 'relinquish [individual] identity in service to society' (Abele 2002: 447), he becomes a specific role, rather than an individual able to contribute in his own name to society. His focus on duty blinds him to more human pursuits and these characteristics are shared with more traditional American action heroes. Ultimately, what we see emerging across the films studied here is a quiet action hero, whose parallel appeals to patriotism and popular cultural references embed him firmly within a transcultural and transatlantic dialogue.

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Enabling collisions: Re-thinking multiculturalism through Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand/Head On*

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Abstract

'Enabling Collisions' considers the possibility of recuperating multiculturalism through an analysis of Fatih Akin's critically acclaimed film Gegen die Wand. Polona Petek argues that cinema in general, and film music in particular, has the potential to move beyond both the complacency of the advocates of multiculturalism as well as beyond the resignation of its detractors. Film soundtracks have the capacity to activate musical taste as the axis along which new forms of multicultural bonding can emerge.

Keywords

Fatih Akin
Head On
cinema
soundtrack
multiculturalism
taste

Multiculturalism is hardly a unanimously defined, let alone generally embraced, phenomenon. The term has a short history. It developed from the word 'multicultural', which came into general usage in the late 1950s in various settler cultures, most notably in Canada and Australia. One of the earliest uses of the compound term 'multi-cultural' occurred in a sentence in the *Times* of Montreal in June 1959, which described this city as a 'multi-cultural, multi-lingual society' (Stratton and Ang 1998: 137). In this article, the word was still seen as enough of a novelty to be written with a hyphen. What is most important to note, however, is the fact that, from its inception, or very shortly thereafter, multiculturalism became part of the rhetoric of the nation-state, and it is as such, as primarily a term referring to government policy, that multiculturalism has entered academic discourses. It is associated with an official recognition of the existence of different *ethnic* groups within the nation-state's borders. It indicates concerns about disadvantage and lack of equity, which the nation-state recognises as its responsibility to address. This makes it clear that multiculturalism must be distinguished from the description of a society as multicultural.

Multiculturalism as a state policy is not necessarily present in societies which can be described as obviously multicultural. This, for instance, is the case in the United States, a multicultural imagined community *par excellence*, yet, one in which multiculturalism is not espoused as a state policy. As Jon Stratton and Ien Ang point out, in some societies, multiculturalism is considered 'controversial because of its real and perceived (in)compatibility with national unity' (1998: 135), that is, because it is

seen as a threat to national unity. However, even in those societies where multiculturalism is implemented as a state policy (societies like Australia and Great Britain), the term has come under close scrutiny in academic circles and, more often than not, it has been dismissed as, at best, ineffectual. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the term has taken on a number of additional meanings. As Homi K. Bhabha writes, multiculturalism has become a 'floating' signifier, 'a *portmanteau* term for anything from minority discourse to postcolonial critique, from gay and lesbian studies to chicano/a fiction' (1998: 31), a catch-all term with increasingly little substance. More importantly, however, most theorists who do keep in mind the intimate link between the term and the nation-statist rhetoric are critical of multiculturalism because of two, relatively closely related issues: first, multiculturalism has been charged with complicity in the exploitative and homogenising ideology of global capitalism; and second, multiculturalism is seen to have failed to achieve its primary goal, that is, it has failed to eliminate racism and xenophobia.

Both points are argued forcefully in Slavoj Žižek's essay 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', where Žižek attacks multiculturalism as 'the ideal form of [the] ideology of global capitalism', which produces a particularly insidious new form of racism, an 'undistilled racist hatred of the Other which renders the rational tolerant attitude utterly impotent' (1997: 44, 37). Echoing the majority of critics of multiculturalism, Žižek argues that multiculturalism, with its reliance on the liberal principles of tolerance and equal respect, amounts to an attitude that 'treats *each* local culture the way the colonizer treats colonized people – as "natives" whose mores are to be carefully studied and "respected"' (1997: 44). Multiculturalism entails a 'patronizing Eurocentrist distance and/or respect for local cultures':

it 'respects' the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed 'authentic' community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position [. . .] from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures—the multiculturalist respect for the Other's specificity is the very form of asserting one's own superiority.

(Žižek 1997: 44)

In short, not only does Žižek consider multiculturalism a state-imposed mechanism for managing cultural diversity through containment and commodification; in fact, he sees it as a neoliberal ideology which will or, at least, *would* be able to survive the dissolution of the nation-states. What multiculturalism boils down to, in Žižek's view, is Western *trans*-, and possibly *post*-national, global, cultural and economic imperialism.

To be sure, Žižek's is an extreme, and extremely negative, perspective. However, the basic premise of his argument is similar to that of the majority of critics of multiculturalism: multiculturalism only comes about once

the West's non-Western Other has been made palatable enough to the Western gaze, that is, once its radical alterity has been trimmed and transformed into something to be consumed. The negative appraisals of multiculturalism – which is to say, the prevalent academic position on this matter at the moment – see multiculturalism as offering to minority cultures access to visibility that comes at a high price, the price of turning their cultural mores into a commodity that can be easily digested by the patronising Western audiences.

In what follows, I seek to challenge this contention. I wish to offer some preliminary thoughts, and stimulate further discussion, about the possibility of recuperating multiculturalism. Drawing on a highly publicised and commercially and critically successful film, I aim to demonstrate the vital role of cinema in reclaiming this currently not too respectable buzzword. I will argue that cinema in general, and the filmmaker's use of music in particular, has the potential to move beyond both the premature complacency of the advocates of multiculturalism as well as the equally premature resignation of its detractors. Film soundtracks have the capacity to activate musical taste as the axis along which new forms of multicultural bonding – complicit in, yet also critical of the processes of commodification – can emerge.

Gegen die Wand/Duvara karsi/Head On (Akin 2004, Germany/Turkey) premiered at the 2004 Berlin Film Festival and won the festival's Golden Bear.¹ This success was followed by the European Film Awards for Best Film and Best Director (2004), numerous other awards,² several weeks of sold-out screenings in Germany and a number of other European countries, and, last but not least, an upsurge of academic interest in the film.³ *Gegen die Wand* has been equally enthusiastically embraced by the German viewers in Germany, the Turkish audiences in Turkey, and the Turkish moviegoers in Germany; in other words, Akin and his fourth feature film have been embraced by the popular masses and the academic circles in all three imagined communities that this film brings into play – Germany, Turkey and the Turkish diaspora in Germany. In fact, all three communities claim this film as a significant contribution to their respective film traditions (that is, German national cinema, Turkish national cinema, and Turkish-German diasporic cinema).⁴ In short, Akin and his fourth feature film are easily recruited as a dream-come-true for the (European and otherwise) advocates of multiculturalism. Akin is the new poster-boy of European cinema, its bright and shining new star, whose fourth film seems perfectly capable of crossing the eroded internal as well as the tightened external borders of the European Union. *Gegen die Wand* apparently facilitates a communion of cultures within and without what is now again – somewhat ominously, given the provenance of the phrase – called Fortress Europe.⁵

The DVD edition of the film is symptomatic in this respect. It features 'The Making of' short, made by a German Greek member of the crew, Adam Bousdoukos. The featurette is less a documentary about the

- 1 Throughout this essay, I refer to Akin's film by its German title, to avoid confusion with Ana Kokkinos's earlier film *Head On* (1998, Australia).
- 2 *Gegen die Wand* also won the Golden Camera 300 at the Brothers Manaki International Film Festival (2004), the German Camera Award (2004), all major awards (best feature film, best director, best actor in leading role, best actress in leading role, and best cinematography) at the German Film Awards (2004), the best film award at the Oslo Films from the South Festival (2004), the best actor and best actress awards at the Nuremberg Turkey–Germany Film Festival (2004), the Spanish Goya award for best European film (2005), and the American National Society of Film Critics Award for best foreign language film (2006).
- 3 The recent Oxford conference on migrant and diasporic cinema in contemporary Europe (Oxford Brooks University, July 2006, <http://www.migrantcinema.net/>) is symptomatic in this respect. About ten percent of the papers, including two keynote addresses, discussed Akin's most successful film to date.
- 4 Although *Gegen die Wand* was not funded by this institution, it is interesting to note that 'a significant factor supporting Turkish-European

co-productions is the emergence of Eurimages, an arm of the Council of Europe established in 1988 to promote and fund the co-production and distribution of audiovisual works. Since Turkey became a member of Eurimages in 1992, more than forty Turkish films have qualified for this European Union funding scheme' (Simpson 2006: n.pp.). Akin, however, drew the funding for *Gegen die Wand* from a Turkish production company (Panfilm), four German companies (Bavaria Film International, Corazón International, Norddeutscher Rundfunk, and Wüste Filmproduktion) and a Franco-German TV network (arte).

5 The phrase Fortress Europe, formerly used to describe the Nazi occupation of the continent during the Third Reich, has entered the vocabulary of Eurosceptics. It is routinely invoked by the critics of the measures adopted by the European Union to restrict immigration from non-EU countries (Griffin 1994).

6 As Wesley D. Chapin (1996) reports, the acquisition of German citizenship is a fairly rare phenomenon among both Turkish *Gastarbeiter* (guestworkers) and *Asylanten* (asylum seekers).

production of *Gegen die Wand* than a vehicle for Bousdoukos's gratitude to Akin, his German Turkish boss, and his praise for the vibrant, colourful and, most importantly, Greek-friendly atmosphere of Istanbul, where a significant part of *Gegen die Wand* was shot.

When I read about the film in 2004, I was thrilled. To be sure, as Nikos Papastergiadis – a theorist whose critique, compared to Žižek's diagnosis, is certainly a much more sober assessment of multiculturalism's current (in)ability for promoting cross-cultural understanding – has observed, multiculturalism most often manifests itself in the form of, for example, gastronomic festivals in cosmopolitan cities like New York, London or Sydney. According to Papastergiadis (2000), these relatively innocuous, not to say ineffectual, cultural events are yet to be matched by socially, economically and politically equally transformative commitment and actions. But I thought, perhaps an internationally produced film like *Gegen die Wand* and its enthusiastic reception in commercial theatres and at various festivals – which certainly constitute transnational public spheres (Gitlin 1998), however minuscule they might be – do represent a step towards such a commitment.

And then I saw the film. And I was bewildered. Of course the story of Cahit (Birol Ünel) and Sibel (Sibel Kekilli) immediately struck me as interesting and compelling on a number of levels. For instance, one of the obvious strengths of the film is that it complicates, rather than simplifies, the representation of displacement. It could easily serve as a classroom example of the urgency to differentiate between exile and diaspora (Durham Peters 1999; Saïd 1990; Tölölyan 1996). The film brings the experience of exilic and diasporic subjects – the former is embodied in Cahit, the latter negotiated with rebellious gusto by Sibel – into close proximity; indeed, it forces them into a tragic collision, but it never conflates them. Furthermore, the film shows that the processes of cultural integration, assimilation and hybridisation (Hall 1991; Bhabha 1995; Papastergiadis 2000) are complex not only because they are asymmetrical, irregular and antithetical to codification, but also because they are hardly unidirectional. Both Akin's protagonists start off as desiring, or having seemingly already accomplished, a certain degree of cultural and civic assimilation in the urban landscape of present-day Hamburg: unlike the majority of the Turkish population in Germany, Cahit and Sibel are both German citizens.⁶ Yet, quite uncharacteristically for naturalised Turkish subjects in Germany who have had to give up their Turkish citizenship, Cahit and Sibel both end up migrating to Turkey, the country of their ethnic origin, the country that their families, but not Cahit and Sibel themselves, call home.

Yet, despite these immediately recognisable qualities of the film, I could not help but wonder whether *Gegen die Wand* really deserved such a unanimous celebration. What troubled me was the question of why this text – a film with such an explicit investment in problematising the representations of the migrant and challenging the static conceptualisations of exilic

and diasporic identities – would stage this intervention in such a conservative manner. For instance, Sibel's family, the film's primary locus of Turkish tradition, is represented in exclusively negative terms, as irredeemably oppressive, inexorably patriarchal, and nothing short of fanatical at that. In this respect, *Gegen die Wand* seems to continue the tradition of the so-called 'cinema of duty', made by minority filmmakers in West Germany in the sixties, the seventies and the early eighties. These films, as Deniz Göktürk writes, 'confirmed the view that German society in general is more civilised and enlightened than the archaic Turkish community. Integration in this binary model could only be achieved by a split between first and second generation immigrants' (2000: 69). And the popularity of these films hinged upon 'the common phantasy of victimised Turkish women who, especially when young and beautiful, need to be rescued from their patriarchal community' (Göktürk 2000: 69).⁷

In its construction of Sibel and her family, *Gegen die Wand* obviously references these Orientalist texts. Yet, it does alter their premise, most obviously by granting Sibel a degree of agency in the choice of her 'rescuer'. Similarly revisionist is the film's construction of this saviour, who, in a departure from the 'cinema of duty', is not a typical German man. Cahit is a naturalised Turkish immigrant. His ethnic background is instantaneously recognisable in his name; he is relatively fluent in both German and Turkish; and he maintains friendships with a couple of Turkish people. Cahit, in short, is not exactly an average 'occidental gentleman'. But neither is he a member of the Turkish diasporic community; this relatively Germanised exile from Mersin refers to Turks not as 'us' but rather as 'them'.

Of course, this could be read simply as an instance of Cahit's (and the film's) refusal of cultural homogeneity, that is, as a way of asserting a hyphenated rather than monolithic cultural identity. However, the way Akin chooses to represent the engendering and negotiation of such identities is rather disturbing – not because it is not glamorous or reassuring but because it is moralistic. Cahit seems to have been able to enter what Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 6–7) would call the transcultural 'contact zone' of Hamburg predominantly because he has espoused the 'vices' of the secular West – alcoholism, drug use, the 'no strings attached' approach to relationships. Similarly, Sibel's desire for freedom from the constraints and expectations of her atavistic family appears to be directed towards a singular goal – unbridled promiscuity rather than emancipation or acquisition of social, economic and/or cultural capital.

On top of all this, the film is rife with homophobia. Its exploration of exilic and diasporic identities is staged through an emphatically heterosexual scenario, and its unconvincing resolution rehearses the familiar heteronormative tropes of home as maternal haven. Yet, homoeroticism is hardly the unspoken subtext in Akin's film; in fact, homosexuality is quite frequently invoked in *Gegen die Wand*, however, always as a means of disparagement.

7 As Göktürk notes, during this period, the federal and regional schemes of film funding and co-productions with television (mainly the public broadcasting channel ZDF) opened up a space for exploring cultural difference and, presumably, fostering cross-cultural understanding. Yet, these state-endorsed multiculturalist policies were rather self-serving. The films that got funded were, as a rule, texts that reinforced patronising and marginalising attitudes towards the so-called *Ausländerkultur*—the culture of (often Turkish) foreigners—and they reproduced common assumptions and popular misconceptions about 'other' cultures. Göktürk has adopted the phrase 'cinema of duty' coined by Sarita Malik (1996) in relation to Black British cinema. Göktürk's examples of German Turkish 'cinema of duty' include Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Shirins Hochzeit/Shirin's Wedding* (1976, West Germany), Tevfik Baser's *40 Quadratmeter Deutschland/40 Square Meters Of Germany* (1986, West Germany) and Hark Bohm's *Yasemin* (1988, West Germany).

8 As the title and the subject-matter of his latest film, *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (Akin, 2005, Germany/Turkey), amply demonstrate, Akin is highly conscious of this reputation.

And yet, despite these initial impressions, and reservations, *Gegen die Wand* lingered on in my memory. And, strangely enough, instead of leaving a bitter aftertaste, the film gradually acquired a much more complex afterglow or, more accurately, a curiously politicised and increasingly powerful echo. I am using this acoustic metaphor advisedly, for what I want to argue is that neither Akin's circulation (as the architect of cinematic bridges between the European Union and its internal and external Turkish 'Others'⁸) nor the story of *Gegen die Wand* (as it is articulated in image and dialogue) capture the gist of this film's enabling critique and reinvention of multiculturalism. I want to argue that the film does move beyond both the premature complacency of the advocates of multiculturalism as well as the equally premature resignation of its detractors; and it does so through its soundtrack, which functions as the film's principal mode of social critique, self-interrogation and, indeed, multicultural mobilisation.

Initially, the soundscape of *Gegen die Wand* seems to thrive on binary oppositions. The film opens with a shot of a wind orchestra accompanying a woman (popular Turkish film and TV actress and director Idil Üner) singing a traditional Turkish love song 'Saniye'm'. Next, we are in a dingy Hamburg bar, where a homophobic remark ignites a brawl between two drunken punters and we are listening to a non-credited German-speaking industrial band. Next, we are in a car with one of the brawlers, the male protagonist Cahit, who, in a failed suicide attempt, crashes his vehicle head-on into a wall while listening to the eighties Depeche Mode classic 'I Feel You'. After Cahit and Sibel, who has also attempted suicide, meet at the hospital, there is another jarring cut back to the wind orchestra in Istanbul, again followed by the diegetic sounds of post-punk popular in Germany in the eighties: we hear Nick Cave's now defunct band The Birthday Party; there are songs performed by Alexander Hacke, Mona Mur and other artists associated with the West Berlin experimental group Einstürzende Neubauten. In short, the film's soundtrack is initially emphatically two-tiered, reinforcing the divide between the sound of Turkey and that of Germany. Or so it seems, for, upon closer inspection, it becomes obvious that the latter is overwhelmingly 'cosmopolitan', and very Western at that, while the former, embodied in an 'authentic' Turkish orchestra, is in fact staged by a band of Romany musicians headed by the famous Gypsy artist Selim Sesler. The first third of the soundtrack, roughly, thus mimics the pre-European Union German government's policy regarding immigration (Chapin 1996), which amounted to a blanket disavowal of immigration, and which is hardly any different from the selective multiculturalist nature of contemporary European Union immigration laws affecting non-EU citizens (Siebert 2003) or, for that matter, from the dominant public opinion regarding the prospect of Turkey becoming a member of the European Union (Bunting 2005).

However, after Cahit and Sibel get married – it is a marriage of convenience, which should simplify things, that is, help Sibel gain independence

from her family while appeasing her parents' desire to see their daughter settle down with 'one of their own' – the film's soundscape, just like its protagonists' identities, becomes increasingly hybrid. Quite unexpectedly, Cahit and Sibel – now supposedly ideally positioned to become fully assimilated – develop a genuine, and *not* disabling, appreciation for their culture of descent. (It is an appreciation encapsulated, quite predictably, in culinary delights.) The soundtrack mirrors this hybridisation. Brechtian cuts to the band in traditional Turkish garb on the shores of Haliç (the Golden Horn) become less frequent. The clubs which Sibel frequents to find her chance lovers play music that fuses techno beats with 'Oriental' tunes (not unlike the winning Turkish entry at the 2004 Eurovision song contest). Even the song 'Temple of Love', which seems to continue the earlier 'Western' tier of the soundtrack and which appears in the moment when the emotional bond between Cahit and Sibel is cemented, is a Trojan horse; it is the 1992 re-recording of the 1983 hit by the Leeds Gothic band The Sisters of Mercy, this time infused with additional 'Oriental' vocals provided by Israeli pop singer Ofra Haza.

Yet, this moment of happy-go-lucky multiculturalism is rather short-lived. The events soon take a downward turn, and the film seems to put the blame on the resurgent residues of the characters' Turkish descent. Cahit is sent to prison for killing one of Sibel's one-night-stands in what is constructed as an outburst of his barbaric, that is, definitely non-European machismo. In a sense, he is sent back to a harsher version of his initial position – prison as the ultimate exilic space. Sibel, in turn, flees to Istanbul to avoid her family's rage. She moves from a diasporic space to what is supposed to be her homeland; yet, once there, she is clearly an unwelcome and ill-adjusted outsider. Even more so than Cahit, she too is now an exile – banished from her diasporic home as well as from her ethnic homeland.⁹ The film underscores their likeness by replaying the Depeche Mode song 'I Feel You', used previously in the scene of Cahit's failed suicide attempt. This is the last Western song we hear in *Gegen die Wand*, and it is followed by a protracted period of excruciating silence during which Sibel gets raped, beaten into a pulp and stabbed. By the time she recovers, gets herself a boyfriend, settles down and gives birth to a girl, and by the time Cahit is released from prison and on his way to Istanbul to find Sibel, the duality of the film's soundscape is restored. More than that in fact; the soundtrack is now utterly monolithic, suffused with ethnic melos and, indeed, pathos, the Western sounds are expelled, and the film ends with another cut to the *faux* Turkish orchestra on the banks of the Golden Horn.

Gegen die Wand, then, seems to stage a failure of multiculturalism. It juxtaposes, and for a brief moment fuses, traditional Turkish melos and Western post-punk in its attempt to imagine a more harmonious, hyphenated rather than assimilated and homogenised Turkish-German experience. Eventually, however, the film seems to relinquish this attempt and withdraw into a performative, and nostalgically rendered monocultural

9 I am alluding to Hamid Naficy's (1999: 2) differentiation between home and homeland as two 'interlocking', yet distinct conceptual frames of exile.

10 As Catherine Simpson reports, 'the way this event was reported in Turkey had all the hallmarks of a great Turkish melodrama. The talks were due to start on 3 October 2005, but Turkey refused to make any more concessions to the European Union. At the eleventh hour, the EU conceded and, in order for the Turkish foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, to sign the document before midnight, the state of Luxembourg stopped the clock to enable him to fly there in time!' (2006: n.pp.)

11 Akin seems to have felt compelled to extend his reflection on this issue beyond *Gegen die Wand*. In *Crossing the Bridge*, he focuses almost exclusively on music to offer another, less stylised and more complex vision of Turkish culture. The protagonist of Akin's documentary, German musician Alexander Hacke, crosses the frontier of the European Union to explore the diversity of the contemporary Turkish music scene in Istanbul. The performers he encounters range from neo-psychedelic group Baba Zula and fusion DJs Orient Expressions to digital dervish Mercan Dede, Kurdish singer Aynur, the "Elvis of Arabesque" Orhan Gencebay, and Roma musician Selim Sesler, who headed the "Turkish" orchestra in *Gegen die Wand*. *Crossing the Bridge*

soundscape of Turkish homeland. Which, of course, is not surprising, given that the film was released early in 2004, that is, a year and a half before Turkey finally, and quite melodramatically, began accession talks with the European Union.¹⁰

And yet, I would argue, another, quite different reading of the film's mobilisation of multiculturalism can be extrapolated from *Gegen die Wand*'s fluctuating soundtrack. For instance, the decision to extricate 'Turkishness' and offer it to the viewer for consumption in its 'purified' form in the interludes shot on the Turkish shores of Haliç may well be a poignant reminder that previously marginalised cultures all too often gain tokenistic recognition and visibility at the cost of very real commodification and co-optation. To some extent, *Gegen die Wand* is implicated in this process; but Akin's film redeems itself by eventually refusing to make the experience of 'authentic Turkishness' available in Germany.¹¹ More importantly, however, *Gegen die Wand* insists on the mythical, imagined nature of such an identity by displacing it onto extradiegetic performers while the film's protagonists negotiate their identities through a different musical repertoire, one composed of quintessential Western-European underground bands collaborating with, rather than consuming, their Eastern and Antipodean colleagues. And it is this repertoire, I would argue, rather than the film's story or its international funding sources, that engenders a more productive multicultural engagement with Akin's film (as well as, hopefully, with the subject matter that the film dramatises). Even if there is a danger of *Gegen die Wand* eliciting from its viewers a patronising ethnographic gaze reminiscent of the 'cinema of duty', the fact that the film's exilic and diasporic subjects negotiate their identities most effortlessly while listening to the joint performance of The Sisters of Mercy and Ofra Haza effectively reduces this possibility and collapses the space of Orientalist distanciation. Akin's choice and placement of specific performers and their musical styles is a powerful agent in the film's positively multicultural spectatorial address. The film refuses to uphold ethnicity as the source of insurmountable cultural difference and the only site of identity negotiation; rather, it activates musical taste as the axis along which new forms of multicultural bonding, free of the burden of ethnic 'heritage', emerge (Slobin 1994).

Christopher Waterman has argued that 'the role of musical style in the enactment of identity makes it not merely a reflexive but also a potentially *constitutive* factor in the patterning of cultural values and social interaction' (quoted in Firth 1996: 117). I agree. How else would I, for instance, a Yugoslavian-born, now willy-nilly Slovenian and, therefore, European citizen, a *Gastarbeiter* at an Australian university, and an individual with an undying penchant for the eighties underground, be able to claim my viewing of Akin's film not as a hypocritical voyeuristic exercise in patronising compassion but rather as a politicised experience of empathy and implication?

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thus complements and expands upon Akin's statement in *Gegen die Wand*: it calls for flexibility and a recognition of cultural hybridity in contemporary negotiations of European identity; it enlists musical taste as a means of stimulating such flexibility; and it emphasises the necessity of extending these negotiations beyond the current borders of the European Union.

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Gendered discourses of nation(hood) and the West in Polish cinema

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Abstract

The present paper by looking at two Polish films featuring foreign women, Do widzenia, do jutra . . . /Good Bye, Till Tomorrow . . . (Morgenstern 1960) and Trzy Kolory: Białe/Three Colours: White (Kieślowski 1993), analyses the ways in which the gendered metaphorical representation of the main characters probes into the questions of Polish identity and its relation to the West, and especially, the West's mythical existence in Polish collective consciousness. The paper examines how both films construct Polish and Western identities through endowing their characters with specific attributes and how their romantic relationships can be metaphorically understood to stand for East/West relationships. The article argues that both films should be interpreted within their respective historical and political situations of the thwarted hopes for more freedom and opening to the West after the October revolution of 1956 in the case of Good Bye, Till Tomorrow . . . and the post-1989 Poland's 'return to Europe' in the case of Kieślowski's Three Colours: White.

Keywords

Krzysztof Kieślowski
metaphor
Polish cinema
East/West relationship
communism
masculinity

Valentina Glajar and Dominica Radulescu in their recently published collection of essays write about Eastern European women in Western cultural representations:¹

Not fully Other, as Islamic or African women have been perceived, familiar because white and still European, Balkan and/or East European women, form, in Western consciousness and imagination, the special category of what one critic has called 'the stranger in our midst'.

(Glajar and Radulescu 2004: 3)

While emphasis on the otherness of Eastern European women is nothing new as the concept of the Other is often evoked to talk about difference, the problematic nature of the already problematic otherness is quite interesting as it throws light not only on the nature of female representation across the East/West divide but also on the way mutual perception of East and West is mediated in gendered form in cinematic representation. The following article by looking at two Polish films featuring Western women, *Do widzenia, do jutra . . . /Good Bye, Till Tomorrow . . .* (Morgenstern, 1960)

- 1 We would like to thank Dr. Owen Evans for editorial comments and help.

2 Both films were made as a kind of reaction to socio-political events: Morgenstern's film was released four years after the October thaw of 1956, the crumbling of Stalinism, whereas Kieślowski's film was made four years after the fall of Communism in Poland in 1989. Both films are then an aftermath, as it were, of an actual or perceived opening up of Poles to Europe, or as the political slogans in 1989 read, the 'return to Europe'. Western women in both films are French. Since the Partitions in the eighteenth century, France has had an exceptional, even mythological, place in the collective consciousness of Poles with Napoleon perceived as an almost almighty hero, powerful enough to help Poland regain her freedom. France has thus always signified to Poles the hopes for sovereignty and in that respect has stood as a metonymy of western countries. During the Partitions France also became the destination of all the greatest Polish émigré poets (Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki), who gave birth to the mythologized figure of the 'Polish émigré artist' (Kieślowski's films definitely need to be read in this particular cultural and historic context) (Kalinowska 2002: 107). No wonder that when Kieślowski takes up Polish issues in his foreign films, *White* and *La Double Vie de Véronique/The Double*

and *Trzy Kolory: Białe/Three Colours: White* (Kieślowski, 1993),² aims to analyse the ways in which the representation of foreign women in Polish cinema extends beyond the literal meaning of 'coming from a foreign country' to become a metaphor of the West and especially the West's mythical existence in the Polish collective consciousness.³

The process of the metaphorical representation of Western women in Polish cinema is nothing exceptional and inscribes itself in the larger paradigm of the allegorical and metaphorical representation of women in culture. In film representation women have often specifically served as the allegorical embodiment of nationhood in such diverse countries as France, Germany, Great Britain, Poland, Spain and Russia.⁴ This attribute of female representation illuminates especially well a certain aspect of the signifying practices characteristic of Polish culture, where allegory of the nation plays a particularly important role. However, it is worth pointing out that Poland-Motherland in the Polish representative system has not always taken a female form. As Dorota Siwicka writes in her essay on the metaphorical images of the Motherland in Polish romantic poetry,

Love for the Motherland disrupts [. . .] the traditional gender dichotomy. [. . .] For it is possible to be a Pole and a man and feel like a woman, suffer and love like her, be pregnant like her. [. . .] A romanticist becomes a woman, because his love makes him internalize the Motherland. Poland, which ceases to exist on the outside, moves into the inside of Poles.

(Siwicka 1993: 71; our translation)

Stephen J. Greenblatt offers an interesting explanation for the resilience and implications of such allegorical representation by stating that, 'allegory arises in periods of loss, periods in which a once powerful theological, political, or familial authority is threatened with effacement. Allegory arises then from the painful absence of that which it claims to recover' (Greenblatt 1981: viii). It is true that the allegory of Poland appeared at the time when Poland lost its freedom and lasted almost in an unchanged form until 1989, the fall of Communism.

By analogy, the representations of Western women, who have rarely featured in Polish cinema, could be considered as precisely a sign of 'absence', signifying a breach of relations that had historically linked Poland to Western countries. While the official communist propaganda in post-war Poland announced the satisfaction with the alliance with the Soviet Union and openly manifested its hostility towards the 'imperialist West', the ordinary people often perceived the Yalta agreement as an act of 'betrayal' on the part of the Western powers, similar to the situation in 1939 when Great Britain and France did not fulfil their pacts with Poland signed earlier that year.⁵ Consequently, in Polish history the post-war trauma overlapped with the trauma of the double abandonment by Western Europe in 1939 and 1945. From this perspective, the betrayals of the metaphorised female protagonists in the two films offer a

particularly interesting embodiment of the collective trauma connected with the West.

Good Bye, Till Tomorrow . . ., which reflects the post-1956 thaw in cinema as well as present-day cultural politics, with its relaxation of censorship and the opening to the aesthetic influences of Western cinema, was the first significant film in post-war cinema history to feature Western European woman. The story of Jacek (Zbigniew Cybulski), an actor and a puppeteer in a student theatre, who falls in love with a daughter of a French Consul, Marguerite (Teresa Tuszyńska) is told in the New Wave style, with more slant towards Truffaut than Godard. However, Godard's *À Bout de Souffle/Breathless* (1960) seems to offer a more direct similarity, especially at the level of the narrative paradigm (in Godard's film a Frenchman falls in love with an American girl; in Morgenstern's a Polish man falls in love with a French girl) as well as the type of narrative conflict that this paradigm evokes. Much the same as Godard manifests in *Breathless*, on the one hand, his fascination with American culture, and especially American cinema, and on the other, his scepticism towards the narrow-mindedness of the American mentality, embodied in Patricia, Morgenstern reveals in his film the ambivalent attitude towards Western Europe represented by Marguerite. Moreover, both male protagonists are ultimately betrayed by the 'foreign' woman. Nevertheless, their reactions to this act of female treachery or disloyalty are completely different. While it would be difficult to treat Michel as the victim of 'unrequited love', Jacek definitely is. He can't adopt, as Michel does, the mask of a jester's grimace, but resigns himself to despair and melancholic sadness. Jacek undoubtedly presents a different kind of masculinity than Godard's protagonist. Consequently, the two protagonists quite differently construct their relationship with the desired woman.

In the Polish film, Jacek throughout the narrative is located in the subservient position in relation to Marguerite, which squarely links him to the powerless female position. The dominance-submission structure is already established during their incidental first meeting, when Marguerite asks Jacek, an accidental passer-by, to hold a dog for her. This apparently inconsequential situation becomes the blueprint of their future relationship in which Jacek is situated in the passive position whereas Marguerite is active, initiating their relationship. Jacek, who is clearly enchanted by the girl, tries to overtake the initiative and suggests a game of tennis the next day, which she accepts and drives away in her luxurious car leaving the spellbound Jacek behind. After the cut relocates the action to the tennis court, we see Jacek playing awkwardly with Marguerite, who is obviously amused by the situation. Jacek, on the contrary, seems quite embarrassed. When his two friends, able tennis players, appear, the beautiful French woman completely loses interest in him, especially as they can communicate fluently as one of them can speak English and the other one French. When Jacek leaves the tennis court, nobody even notices. Those two scenes manifestly establish a number of differences between the two characters.

Life of Veronique (1991), he locates them in the French context.

- 3 It is worth pointing out that the Poles have always felt strong ties to Western way of life and thinking, which seem to have evolved into an almost mythological type of existence of the West in Polish public imagination, intensified by actual (geographical) and figurative (ideological) separation. As Norman Davies argues in his *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland*, 'For the Poles, the West is a dream, a land beyond the rainbow, the lost paradise. The Poles are more Western in their outlook than the inhabitants of most Western countries' (Davis 2001: 303).
- 4 In this representation women serve as carriers of national collective narratives, fulfilling the purpose of strengthening and consolidating the nation. For example, Helena Goscilo writes in the context of Russia that 'From time immemorial the dominant Russian iconography has projected nationhood as female, its ethos and moral identity metaphorized as maternity. . . . in Russia's predominantly agrarian and peasant society, motherland was *rodina-mat*, *Mat Rossiia* (Mother Russia), a fecund source of self-perpetuation and nurture' (Goscilo 1996: 32). Similarly,

Bleiche Mutter (Pale Mother) allegorises Germany (strangely referred to as Fatherland) as mother in the tradition, which, Anton Kaes claims, goes back to Romantic poets, but which gets special currency in the times of Hitlerism in Bertold Brecht's poem *Germany*. Kaes suggestively explains that in the poem 'the National Socialist terror [features] as a family conflict in which the sons violate and shame mother Germany' (Kaes 1992: 147). Much the same, Helma Sander's-Brahm's film *Deutschland, Bleiche Mutter* (Germany, Pale Mother, 1976) utilises the gendered allegory. In Spanish cinema, which has always used allegory as an effective way of communication with its audience, women often stood for the nation, especially for its fight for independence under Franco but also beyond, the film *Ana y Los Lobos/Anna and the Wolves* (Saura 1973) can serve as a good example.

- 5 Both France and Great Britain signed in 1939 with Poland the military pacts of mutual military assistance in case of Germany's aggression, which neither of them fulfilled.
- 6 The theme of otherness and the incompatibility of the two worlds, metaphorised as two different planets, is further emphasised through references to the book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*.

First of all, Marguerite owns a car, which enables her easy movement in space (it is a reversal of gender roles as it is usually a man who has the privilege of spatial mobility; we will see the same kind of reversal in *White*), while Jacek recommends a stroll on foot through the city and its magical quarters. For Marguerite, the stroll becomes not only a journey through space but also through time, as if she has moved back into the pre-modern age. Secondly, while her favourite pastime is playing tennis with anyone who is available, he prefers the amateur puppet theatre created together with his friends. And thirdly, her knowledge of languages makes her, as it were, a citizen of the world, while his world is painfully restricted to his native language. The enumerated differences ultimately establish a set of fundamental binary oppositions: modernity vs. pre-modernity, leisure/recreation vs. art, worldliness/cosmopolitanism vs. familiarity/parochialism, which are easy to interpret as metaphorical perceptions of Western Europe and Poland. The differences which separate the two protagonists are also visualised at the level of *mise-en-scène*: they are filmed several times on the two sides of the fence and the wrought iron gate which separates the Consul's residence from the rest of the city. Additionally, on many occasions it is Jacek who is framed looking through the bars at the house where his beloved lives. It is difficult not to read those images as metaphors of the Poles looking from behind the 'Iron Curtain' at Western Europe.⁶

The female metaphor of Western woman, therefore, in the case of *Good Bye, Till Tomorrow* . . . has a complex function of both mediating the collective Polish (male) subjectivity and negotiating the Polish-Western relationship in the changed historical situation of the post-Stalinist thaw and opening to the West. In other words, through the establishment of Marguerite, a foreign woman, as the Other in relation to Jacek, a Polish man, Jacek not only becomes the One but also the metaphor of Poland. Jacek, as a metaphorical figure of Poland, evokes, on the one hand, the romantic imagery of the Motherland mentioned at the beginning of this article where we notice the transgression of the gender binary oppositions. On the other hand, his representation reveals the aspect of Polish masculinity, which not only makes it significantly different, due to the complex political and historical factors, from the typical Western model of masculinity but also, as we want to argue, is a defining characteristic of Polish masculinity in the two films chosen for analysis. In short, a distinctive set of historical and political circumstances in Poland after the Partitions resulted in a kind of blurring or weakening of the patriarchally defined difference in gender roles (Watson 1993).⁷ This attenuation of patriarchy, which is traditionally based on the concept of male power and privilege in the public sphere, was due to the loss of the nation state and the annexation of the public sphere by the captors. Polish men in the time of captivity, and of the Soviet regime, too, had little access to the positions of power and authority in the public sphere (or otherwise they were morally suspect), which seriously inhibited the realisation of hegemonic masculinity based on high performance in the nation's public life and led to a certain kind of emasculation of Polish men.⁸

Jacek from *Good Bye, Till Tomorrow* . . . serves as a good example of the attenuation of the culturally prescribed masculinity in Poland and a specifically Polish 'complex of the West'. *Good Bye, Till Tomorrow* . . . , which, as mentioned above, should be interpreted as swimming on the tide of the October 1956 revolution, represents the defeated hopes for changes in the power structures of society at that time and, as a consequence, the impossibility of overcoming the crisis for Polish men (especially the relaxation of the alliance with the Soviet Union and the access of Polish men to positions of power). While the film represents the condition of the Polish nation represented by Polish males, its ending, as Marguerite abandons Jacek, metaphorically re-enacts the thwarting of their ambition that with the help of Western countries, Poland will break free from the Soviet Union and reunite with Europe. The metaphorical reading of the ending of the film suggests that it is the symbolic re-enactment of the traumatic experience of Poland being abandoned, and in fact considered inessential and dispensable, by Europe.

The characterisation of Marguerite through male attributes – spatial mobility, active pastimes (car and tennis function here as the signifiers of agency but also of prestige and money), the command of language – should not come as a surprise as we are dealing here with the *positions* in the submission-domination power structure rather than anything else. If Jacek represents Poland and is endowed with female characteristics and Marguerite the West and possesses male attributes, the two characters together may be interpreted to convey the power relations that dominate Polish-Western coexistence, or generally East/West relations. John Borneman and Nick Fowler confirm this claim in their article 'Europeanization' by stating that the defining characteristics of Western countries' relation to their Eastern neighbours is the idea of paternalism, dependent in large measure on the stereotype (and reality) of economic inequality: 'the East [is] poor and underdeveloped both politically and economically; and the West [is] rich and developed' (1997: 495), which refers us back to the binary oppositions explicitly established by the narrative's characterisation of the two protagonists. The fact that the metaphor of the West adopts a feminine form with masculine attributes emphasises the paternalistic nature of the relationship between the West and Poland and exacerbates Jacek's enfeeblement. Marguerite's unattainability in this 1960s film poignantly symbolises the equally unattainable West for Poles at that time. From this perspective, Jacek's feelings towards Marguerite could be interpreted as the metaphorical representation of Poland's 'unrequited love towards the West', of which the 'Polish complex of the West', manifestly epitomised through his crisis in masculinity, is the reverse side.

The Polish crisis in masculinity and the 'complex of the West', become even more problematic after the fall of Communism, when one can observe the 'rise of masculinism', which, as Peggy Watson argues (1993) is an answer to, and a consequence of, the historically conditioned emasculation of Polish men described earlier. Our contention is that *Three*

- 7 This 'gender confusion' must have taken quite a conspicuous form to be noticed by foreigners; Frederick William II of Prussia allegedly said that in Poland it is women who are really men (Lewandowski 1995:132).
- 8 Unlike in the case of masculinity, the loss of sovereignty by Poland during the Partitions did not jeopardise women's traditionally defined femininity established through the private sphere. We can even say that to a considerable extent the position of women was strengthened under captivity given their importance as carriers and guardians of Polish national identity, which could only take place in the private sphere. For further details see E. Ostrowska (1998) on Polish Mother.

9 It is significant in this context that the film was released at the time when the talks about Poland's membership of NATO and the EU were already under way and The Balcerowicz Plan, which introduced the market economy, was in full swing.

Colours: White, in its bizarre and ludicrous, especially from the gendered perspective, story of the vindictive Polish hairdresser and his beautiful French wife portrays in a metaphorical way, on the one hand, the relationship between Poland and Western Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and, on the other, orchestrates the (successful) attempt to overcome the historically conditioned emasculation of Polish men as a result of the reconstruction of the public sphere and at the expense of the exclusion of women from it (Watson 1993).⁹

Three Colours: White by Krzysztof Kieślowski makes a fine example of this thesis, with the first part of the film's substance revolving around the literal and symbolic castration of its main protagonist and the second staging the successful plot to overcome it. In many ways the first part of *White* is similar to *Good Bye, Till Tomorrow* . . . The whole first sequence of the film is built around Karol's (Zbigniew Zmachowski) impotence; his figurative impotence actually reinforced by the literal one. Both narratively and visually, the film establishes Karol's inferior position in relation to Dominique (Julie Delpy) through a set of virtually the same binary oppositions as in the Morgenstern's film. Once again the privilege of spatial mobility is denied to the protagonist who is first introduced by a close-up of his Chaplinesque walk, signifying vulnerability, gullibility and a simple man, and worn-out shoes, the sign of his poverty. He is walking to the court to attend his divorce case on the grounds that the marriage has not been consummated. Significantly, he has been impotent since coming to France and marrying Dominique. As the situation, as we shall later see, will reverse in Poland, his feebleness in France is certainly meant to signify his 'complex of the West'.

Karol's impotence is further emphasised by his faulty French – the command of language being one of the means of male dominance – when Karol has to explain his predicament through the translator. The lack of language competence of the male protagonists in both *Good Bye, Till Tomorrow* . . . and *Three Colours: White* has to be interpreted in the light of Lacanian theory as the exclusion from the Symbolic order and the position of power and authority. As Mike Wayne comments on this sequence, 'the private is constantly catapulted into the public realm' (2002: 102), which, evocatively sheds light on years of the humiliation and emasculation, and indeed impotence, of Polish men and the blurring between the spheres. But it is the next scene which brings the most explicit sign of the crisis of Karol's masculinity and his ultimate degradation and submission to Dominique. When Karol finds out that his joint account has been frozen by his wife, which leaves him broke, the camera focuses on Karol's face to show how he visibly winces at the sight of his card being cut with scissors by the bank clerk: definitely 'castration is in the air'.

To accentuate that a certain emasculation of Polish men is a more universal than individual predicament of Polish men, the theme of masculinity in crisis extends onto other significant male characters in the film. The uncanny pensiveness and weakness of Mikołaj, Karol's comrade who wants somebody to kill him as he does not want to commit suicide himself,

often regarded as the sign of metaphysics at work by critics, may also be interpreted as the generalised enfeeblement of Polish men rooted in a very concrete historical situation, namely the residual weariness of a Communist past.¹⁰ In addition, Karol's brother, Jurek (Jerzy Stuhr), is a decisively feminised character in his nurturing role of taking care of Karol, cooking for him (even baking a cake!), and waiting at home for Karol to return, the way stereotypical wives do for their husbands.¹¹

Conversely, Dominique is in a privileged position in all respects; not only does she drive away after the case in the car but she can also obviously speak impeccable French and has stripped Karol of all his possessions: money, the hairdresser's salon, passport. Once again the submission-domination pattern is firmly in place: the woman is in full control of space, language and the public domain. Significantly, the car Dominique 'steals' from Karol is an old Polonez, the Polish make and the symbol of Communist obsolete technological progress, which only makes Dominique's greed, and Karol's unfortunate position, more conspicuous, if not bitterly ironic. Incidentally, it also adds a national dimension to the conflict, the theme already established in the protagonists' different nationalities and the big suitcase on the conveyor belt at the airport, which to cite Wayne again, is a 'symbol of Karol's geographical displacement' (2002: 102).

The next scenes, too, make it explicit that Karol's inferiority along gender lines overlaps with the national one, the 'Polish complex of the West'. Firstly, when Karol throws away all his Polish diplomas, the scene succinctly underlines that his Polish education is useless in the West, which allocates him the place of the least paid worker in the lowest of jobs. Secondly, when Karol becomes irrationally distraught by the loss of two francs, the incident's function is not only to highlight his emotional turmoil but also to link it to his parlous financial situation in which two francs is a fortune to him due to the discrepancy between the currencies in the West and the East. Clearly, the submission-domination axis, similarly to *Good Bye, Till Tomorrow* . . . , not only runs along gender lines but also along the divide of Western and Eastern Europe, where again the metaphorical representation of the West is endowed with paternalistic characteristics and the East is squarely in the weak feminine position. In addition, the location of the betrayal in the Western woman, her ruthlessness and indifference (decisively caused by her sensing powerlessness in Karol; his actual impotence symbolising the lack of power in other respects), reiterates the theme of the West's betrayal of, or indifference towards, Poland explored in connection with *Good Bye, Till Tomorrow* Adding another, but related, dimension to our analysis, Paul Coates notices in the same context, that: 'Read allegorically, it [*White*] dramatizes Polish fears of exclusion from Europe' (1996: 23).¹²

However, the culmination of the emphasis on the metaphorisation of the two protagonists and the gender/national submission-domination tropes all meet in the poster for Godard's film, *Le Mépris*, with the central figure of Brigitte Bardot. The multilayered significations of the poster

10 Tadeusz Lubelski, citing Michal Bruk, writes in the context of *Ashes and Diamonds* that young men in the 1950s were stripped of all their ideals by the ideological turmoil of those years, which left them pessimistic and broken (2000:159). Similarly, the 1990s found many men of Mikołaj's age, who lived most of their lives under communism, disillusioned and weary. It is perhaps worthwhile to notice in this context Kieslowski's own pessimistic and weary outlook.

11 We might also parenthetically remark in this context that the majority of other Polish films of this period depict the failure of male protagonists, while those few which feature macho characters endow them with foreign names as if success were not the domain of Polish males. Tadeusz Lubelski (1994:20) writes that in eleven out of thirteen early 1990s feature films the male protagonist fails. Marek Haltof (2004:138) notices that in action movies (emulations of the American ones), the male protagonists have foreign-sounding names, Kroll in *Kroll* (1991) or Maurer in *The Pigs* (1992), while Karol suggests an inconspicuous everyman.

12 Coates also further notices that the fears may be Kieslowski's own about working in the West, especially

that Karol shares with Kieślowski the same initials (1996: 24).

- 13 Marianne, in the form of a plaster bust, is considered to be the most prominent embodiment of the French Republic. Her presence is ubiquitous from the official seal of the country through Euro coins and banknotes to sculptures in town halls and law courts. Available at <http://www.ambafrance-us.org/atoz/marianne.asp>. Accessed 1 September 2006.

- 14 Available from http://jarle.eltelevest.no/Laetitia_Casta/Sub_Pages/Marianne.htm. Accessed 14 August 2007.

- 15 In addition, Watson explains that the process is facilitated by the pre-existing traditionalism reinforced by Communism. Under Communism neither men nor women could realise their normative gender identities, that is, men were unable to perform in the public sphere whereas women usually could not afford to sacrifice themselves only to home. The longing for 'normality', thus, not only entailed the change of the political system but also the return of the prescribed gender identities.

demand a more thorough analysis here. The national theme again interweaves with that of gender in the sequence leading to the Bardot poster. After another unsuccessful attempt at making love to Dominique, Karol, resigned, goes to the metro station. On his way there, however, he stops briefly in front of a shop window where, as we learn later, he buys a plaster bust of a woman. On return to Poland, the bust becomes the object of Karol's devout worship. Obviously, the bust symbolises Dominique. Yet it also bears an uncanny resemblance to Marianne,¹³ the ubiquitous symbol of France. When in the next scene Mikołaj mistakes Bardot, who actually was a model for Marianne in 1968, for Dominique, the metaphorical representation of France/the West through Dominique becomes even more transparent.¹⁴ Additionally, Bardot's role of the contemptuous wife of Michelle Piccoli in *Le Mépris* (an explicit French New Wave reference similar to the one in Morgenstern's film) directly comments on the relationship between Karol and Dominique, and Poland and the West, or at least the way it is perceived in the Polish public imagination.

The third level of signification of the Bardot poster, noted by Julia Dobson (1999), is that of woman as the fetishised object of desire. The first part of the film powerfully establishes Dominique as the Other, the remote object of desire, the way Marguerite was for Jacek. In several scenes – in fantasy flashbacks of the wedding ceremony, in the worshipped statue of the woman, and in her unattainability – the film elaborates the mythical existence of Dominique as Woman and not a woman. The intense feelings of Karol towards Dominique, bordering on perversity, emphasise the *leit-motif* of 'unrequited love', which again can be interpreted as the expression of the mythological existence of the West in the collective imagination of Poles. However, this passion is problematised by the equally intense feeling of hate and vengefulness, clearly motivated by being abandoned at the moment when Karol needed Dominique most, the way Poland needed the West but was left at the mercy of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, it is the second part of the film which most emphatically reworks the theme of Polish national identity across gender lines and the 'return to Europe'. One potential explanation of this section of *White* may be offered by Peggy Watson who argues that the creation of civil society and a market economy in Eastern Europe requires 'the transformation of the relationship between public and private spheres' (Watson 1993: 482). Essentially, she claims that the transition to a liberal economy is coterminous with the 'construction of a "man's world"' and the propagation of masculinism in the public sphere as a way of the purging of previous emasculation of men (Watson 1993: 472). The domestication of women, and the de-grading of feminine identity, is the inevitable corollary of this process (1993: 472).¹⁵ The second half of the film offers a vengeance story where Karol finally proves himself a man by acquiring a number of traditionally masculine attributes and sends Dominique to prison.

First of all, the purging of Karol's emasculation is decisively linked to his financial condition. After coming back to Poland, Karol vigorously

snatches the opportunity to perform in the public sphere and becomes a businessman to earn a fortune in a shady business. The amassed money allows him to fake his own death to lure Dominique to Poland to collect the inheritance and gives him the chance to rehabilitate himself in her eyes. Secondly, financial security boosts his confidence to the extent that he can finally prove himself in sexual terms, which is nothing surprising in a culture which to a large measure links men's literal ability to be a breadwinner with a more metaphorical sexual potency. Significantly, and to offer an allegorical reading, the scene of reunion with Dominique (the West), namely the prolonged scene of Karol making Dominique scream from orgasmic pleasure (the utter proof of his masculinity), takes place just after the burial of the Russian corpse (the Soviet Union) at the cemetery and caused by Karol (Poland). In the previous scene Karol inspects the decay of the 'Russian import' and literally shuts the lid of the coffin over it after placing the two-franc coin he brought from France, a symbol of his poverty caused by the Soviet Union and experienced most acutely in the West.¹⁶ And last but not least, Karol learns French. Even though we see him learning it before, the first, and only, significant scene where he actually speaks it is the scene where he proves his sexual prowess, figuratively attaining his position as the subject in the Symbolic order.

Essentially, the world created in the second part of the film is a 'man's world'. Apart from Dominique there is no other significant female character and the male power is exerted by quintessentially male camaraderie between Karol and Mikołaj, and corrupt policemen, lawyers and small-time crooks. Nothing is impossible in this man's world as Karol's omnipotence extends from ordering the engineer building his manor to framing Dominique for his death. Significantly, a large part of the male power rests on the fact that they can 'own' women and exclude them from male affairs. The last scene of the film makes a fine example of this thesis when we see Dominique literally behind the bars miming to Karol that when she is freed she would not like to fly to France but stay in Poland and marry him. The use of the metaphor of the prison to signify patriarchal relations (Helman 1999: 125) is an especially apt one as Molly Haskell remarked some thirty years ago: 'The circumscribed world of the housewife corresponds to the state of woman in general, confronted by a range of options so limited she might as well inhabit a cell' (Haskell 1987: 159). In this context, the portrayal of Dominique behind the bars is the direct reversal of the image of Jacek from *Good Bye, Till Tomorrow . . .*, and may be interpreted as a commentary on the changed historical situation, where Western Europe will, perhaps, return Poland's love to it.

The figure of Dominique functions here as a kind of double metaphor for both the relationship with the West and gender relations in the post-Soviet countries with their sharp division between public and private spheres. As such she conforms to our thesis that in some respects she is the Other and in some others she is familiar: she is the 'stranger in our midst'. For Karol, however, Dominique functions as a crucial Other in the

16 Jerzy R. Krzyżanowski (1980) notices that one of the main components of the 'Polish complex' is an anti-Russian (and anti-Soviet) sentiment.

formation of his identity. The fact that his empowerment takes place in Poland directly accentuates that for the first time after such a long time Polish males are given the opportunity to inhabit the public sphere and realise their hegemonic masculinity. After years of emasculation by the oppressors they can, at last, be themselves at home in Poland. The two scenes referring to Andrzej Wajda's *Popiół i Diament*/*Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) (cf. Haltof 2004: 138) are pivotal to such an interpretation.

In the first scene Karol is dumped in a rubbish tip after he has been stolen from the airport. He looks at the tip and the camera takes on a long point-of-view shot at the scavenging birds when Karol sighs, 'Home at last'. The scene harks back to the death of the main protagonist of *Ashes and Diamonds*, Maciek, in a 'rubbish tip of History'. The metaphor of Poland as the 'rubbish tip of History' with the scavenging birds corresponds not only to the turbulent Polish history but also suitably describes the 1990s Poland's rugged capitalism. If we add to it the overall meaning of *Ashes and Diamonds* which 'rejuvenated, entrenched in the public imagination, the romantic myth of the spiritually free Pole, who above all wants to "live in the free Motherland"' (Lubelski 2000: 173; our translation), we will get the picture of Karol who is now given this privilege. The second scene offers a similar interpretation. When Karol tries to kill Mikołaj, he staggers and falls into Karol's arms, analogously to Szczuka who falls into the arms of Maciek. While in *Ashes* the embrace of the two enemies and the real death signifies the existent divisions in society after the Second World War under the Soviet occupation, in *White* the embrace of the two friends and the fake death signify the rebirth of the Nation, unified, and symbolised by male comradeship.

One more aspect of the film seems to require qualification here: the use of the (droll) comedy conventions by Kieślowski. By utilising the generic conventions, Kieślowski unavoidably takes up the position of the sceptic, not to say ironist, towards the problem of masculinism, which frees the story of literacy and allows for a degree of authorial distance towards representation, and especially the vindictory imaginary scenario concocted by Polish masculinity after 1989. In other words, Kieślowski's intentional emphasis on grotesque and farce exposes in an ironic way the re-masculinisation in Poland and the Polish revengeful attitude towards Dominique/Europe.

As we have tried to show, Marguerite and Dominique represented as the Other stand for more than simply foreigners but mediate the myths of the West functioning in Polish collective consciousness. The female metaphor of the West in Polish cinema visualises the uneasy relationship between the unofficial desire for the West and the official repression of this desire, which, however, following Freud's dictum becomes the very substance of the Unconscious. Incidentally, in psychoanalysis that which is repressed, as the West was under Communism, becomes the Other, the uncanny, the alien – the familiar metaphor of Woman. The repressed desire for the West, but also the equally repressed hostility towards it for its perceived betrayals, is thus displaced onto the Western woman in Polish

cinematic representation. The category of the Other is especially apt in this context in yet another way: under Communism Western countries existed as distinct and adversary, that is an essential Other. Thus, the otherness of the West neatly overlaps with the otherness of the woman.

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The making of a feminist film: Sofia Scandurra's *Io sono mia*

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Abstract

Two years after its publication in 1975, director Sofia Scandurra transposed Dacia Maraini's 'feminist novel' Donna in guerra [Woman at War] into a film which follows the book's events quite closely, giving it, however, a more openly feminist title: Io sono mia [I Belong to Me]. The film created quite a stir in the Italian movie world in the latter 1970s not only for its presumed feminist content, but also because it was produced by an all-women technical cast. Drawing on both past and recent interviews and reviews, this article first presents the problems that director and crew had to face in their goal of trying to make a feminist film from a feminist novel. Then the article looks at the film Io sono mia to discuss some of the issues of adaptation from its source, in particular those connected with the explicit feminist message the film tried to convey. Considering the reactions of the press and the director after its release, the article concludes by discussing the question of whether Io sono mia was, after all, a feminist film.

Keywords

adaptation
feminism
all-women crew
Maraini
Scandurra

The announcement that a woman would direct an all-women crew in the adaptation of Dacia Maraini's feminist novel *Donna in guerra*, was more than enough to attract the interest of the Italian press in the late 1970s. 'Stay away, evil man' (Grassi 1977a: 30), 'A feminist challenge on the screen' (Grassi 1977b), and 'Watch out for the female directors' (Satta 1977) are some of the headlines that accompanied the planning, shooting, editing and finally the release of Sofia Scandurra's film *Io sono mia/I Belong to Me* (Scandurra 1978).¹ Feminist publications and popular weeklies both gave ample space to the project, documenting the debates before and after its release.

Recently available on commercial videotape but currently hard to obtain, *Io sono mia* constitutes an important historical document for scholars of Italian and women's cinema both because of its exceptional production (it remains to this day the only Italian film created by an all female crew), for its attempt to become a feminist political gesture in the cinematographical world, and for being one of the first film adaptations of Dacia Maraini's works.

In this article, drawing on both past and recent interviews and reviews, I will point out several features of this unique production. First I will present the problems that director and crew had to face in their goal of trying to make a feminist film from a feminist novel. I will then look at the

- 1 All translations from the Italian into English in this article are mine, except for Dacia Maraini's *Woman at war*.

- 2 This translation of the last line of the novel is mine. It seems to me, in fact, that Benetti and Spottiswood's translation of the last line – 'Now I'm alone and I must start everything again from the beginning' (Maraini 1988: 282) – does not convey the possible positive connotation of the original Italian 'Ora sono sola e ho tutto da ricominciare' (Maraini 1975: 269).

film *Io sono mia* and discuss some of the issues of adaptation from its source, in particular those connected with the explicit feminist message the film tried to convey. Considering the reactions of the press and the director after its release, I will conclude by discussing the question of whether *Io sono mia* was, after all, a feminist film.

Scandurra once commented that during the 1970s mothers would often learn from their daughters (Vicari 1978) and in her own case Scandurra's own 'moderate' feminism was somehow surpassed by her daughters' more activist one (Scandurra 2005). The story goes that Scandurra's youngest daughter Ludovica, at the age of twelve, gave her mother Dacia Maraini's novel *Donna in guerra* (translated into English as *Woman at War*) as a Christmas present when it was first published, in 1975 (Anon. 1977b: 25). The book, which was hailed at the time as 'if not the first, probably the most important feminist novel in Italy' (Mameli 1975), is the diary of six months in the life of Vannina, a primary school teacher. At the beginning of her summer holiday Vannina, a passive, docile woman, had resigned herself to a routine job and an unsatisfactory sex life with her husband Giacinto. During the summer, however, she met a number of people who opened her eyes to her condition of dissatisfaction and oppression. By the end of the novel, she had acquired a different attitude. She would rebel against the passivity that had previously marked both her personal and professional life. At school, she started talking to the children about topics that had become important to her: refusal of violence, respect for people's bodies and feelings. At home, she realised that she could no longer accept her husband's use of her body. Ultimately, when Giacinto decides that she needs to become pregnant in order to return to the 'sweet, shy, (. . .) hardworking' (Maraini 1988: 259) woman he had married, and forces her to conceive, she aborts the child and leaves her husband. The diary ends with Vannina having refused Giacinto's attempt to make up, alone, and 'with everything to start again' (Maraini 1975: 269).²

Scandurra recalls how she was immediately taken by the novel. She decided to make a film out of it and asked Maraini for the novel's rights (Scandurra 2005). In an interview, Maraini declared that she had thought that *Donna in guerra* would be a difficult novel to adapt. Nevertheless, having received offers from several directors, she chose Sofia Scandurra who had told her that the novel 'was a film already made, ready to shoot' (Sereni 1976).

Scandurra, for her part, had been involved in cinema for many years, at first working with her husband Antonio Leonviola, then as screenwriter with Damiano Damiani, and finally as an assistant director to Luigi Zampa, Nino Manfredi and others (Poppi 1993: 235). However, she had never directed a film. Scandurra told me that initially she had meant to work with the few other women whom she knew were working in cinema, like set designer Elena Ricci Pocchetto, and costume designer Elena Mannini. As planning progressed, however, more and more women were recruited until finally Scandurra ended up with 23 women, in what

became known as the first Italian film made by an all-female crew. In addition to the male actors, only the electricians and the grips were male, as it was impossible to find women who could do those jobs, and union laws prevented the production from recruiting abroad (Scandurra 2005).

Making a feminist film, explained Maraini, did not mean merely talking about women's problems, but also giving space to women to express themselves (Sereni 1976), as well as giving them priority in the professional fields (Brock 1976). The challenge of making this film, then, was not only to adapt a feminist novel to the screen, but also to allow the production itself to be a political statement: that women had the skills and the creativity to cover many roles in the cinema world, that they should not only be hired as assistants or helpers, that they refused hierarchical structures and limited roles, and that it was possible to make a collaborative film in which the choices would be discussed and approved by the entire crew (Anon. 1977b: 24–25).

Unlike other feminist productions at the time, which were done with a 16 mm videocamera and had limited distribution, *Io sono mia* aimed to reach an ample range of audiences, and so needed to be commercially distributed (Costantini 1978). This brought other problems to the director, who had to accept decisions made by the producer, decisions which radically modified her plans for the film. For example, her screenplay counterbalanced many of the events of the novel with dream scenes, some taken from the novel, others added (with the approval of the novel's author) in order to avoid what Scandurra considered excessive didacticism. The day before they started shooting, however, the producer made it clear that Scandurra could not shoot the dream scenes; only Fellini could afford dream scenes, not a new director. At the last minute Scandurra also had to accept the producer's change of actors without any previous communication (Scandurra 2005). Even the film title was an invention of the producer, who did not want the cinema audience to expect a war film. Neither Scandurra nor Maraini was happy with the new title, a feminist slogan of the age, as it might have given the wrong idea that the film was about a feminist woman (Satta 1977).

Thus, with all these difficulties in front of her, when the crew had finally arrived to the moment of shooting, Scandurra was at the point of abandoning the project. The co-producer and co-screen writer Lù Leone, however, convinced her to stay, since the project had already taken on political overtones. In the end, therefore, although she was not happy with the conditions and what she knew would be the final results, Scandurra felt that she had a duty to make the film, or the crew would have lost the entire battle (Scandurra 2005).

The difficulties posed by the nature of the project and the production added to the challenges that the novel itself presented for its screen adaptation: it was written as a diary; it had several major and many minor characters; and finally, it had a vast number of episodes which involved armed political struggle side by side with the description of the daily chores of the protagonist.

3 A notable exception was Troianelli, who mentioned in passing the 'latent and unacknowledged male homosexuality' depicted in the film (Troianelli 1978a: 58).

Scandurra said that she did not even consider the possibility of keeping the film as a diary, with a possible voice-over of the protagonist, but rather allowed the film to follow the novel's events quite closely, in relation to Vannina's story (Scandurra 2005). I would argue, however, that the director went a step further than simply eliminating the diary format, when she added new episodes where Vannina was not present, which were not explicitly written in the novel. I am referring in particular to two occasions in which the film shows Giacinto, Vannina's husband, in the company of Santino, a local young man whom Giacinto has befriended.

In her diary, Vannina cannot help but notice how Giacinto imposes Santino's presence at their table, spoils him like a young child, is generally happy when he is around and upset when Santino disappears. In their first conversation, Vannina's friend Suna warns her that Santino is probably in love with her husband, but Vannina only thinks that the paralytic, striking young woman 'must be a bit neurotic and had invented the whole story to attract attention' (Maraini 1988: 59). The film took other further steps in its depiction of the relationship between the two men, by presenting scenes taking place when Vannina was not with them.

In one episode, in particular, the film shows the two men at the beach fishing. Santino, who had been previously defined in the film as 'part man, part woman', puts a wig-like octopus on his head, and asks Giacinto: 'Do you like me?' The two men quickly become engaged in a sort of friendly fish-throwing fight which results in their almost naked bodies entwined on the beach, finally separating in a postcoital-like moment of relaxed satisfaction, in which Giacinto coughs exactly as he does after having sex with Vannina. The sexual tone of the scene is further underlined by Giacinto's request to Santino that he passes one of his female tourists on to him, and by Santino's description of the sexual characteristics of one such lady. The insertion in the film of this type of scene is suggestive of an implied homoerotic attraction between the two men, which Vannina, in her diary notes, refused to acknowledge. In this aspect, then, the infraction to the limited point of view of Vannina, dictated by the diary, allowed Scandurra to make more explicit references to Giacinto's attraction for Santino, adding a further layer of ambiguity to the main male character. The film's depiction of homoerotic relationships between men seems to have been either too subtle or too progressive for the time, as reviewers made no mention of it.³

A second problem in the adaptation of the novel was the considerable number of characters who have an important role in it. In addition to the female protagonist, the novel presents a vast array of major characters, who act as catalysts of Vannina's final coming to awareness in the novel: from her sexually liberated, paralytic friend Suna; to Tota and Giottina, two island women who at the same time attract and repulse Vannina with their magical gossip, full of erotic innuendo; to Vittorio and the other members of the political movement 'Proletarian victory', who involve Vannina and Suna in their plans for armed revolt; to Mafalda, whose

involvement with the political movement prevents her from continuing her homosexual relationship with Suna.

While most of the novel's major female characters appear in the film, several of the male characters were eliminated or drastically transformed. One important change in the film was to cancel completely the part about Vannina's involvement with the political movement. The goal of this cut, explained Scandurra, was to privilege the 'private' side of the protagonist's life; also, the producer admitted, economic factors played an important role (Anon. 1977a: 19). Finally, the apparent non-political nature of the film had the effect of highlighting Vannina's growth in terms of women's issues, as it was brought about by her interaction with other women.

Feminist reviewers, however, complained that the novel's criticism of politicised men becomes lost in the film (Anon 1977a: 20–21). The novel in fact made it a point that not just traditional men, but even the men involved in a struggle in favour of underprivileged classes had no respect for their female counterparts, either ignoring, patronising, exploiting them or refusing to accept their leadership, even though their knowledge, ability and charisma were obviously superior to anybody else's. Although not a member of the revolutionary group, in the novel Giacinto defined himself as a communist. Thus his exploitation of Vannina is meant to be read as a condemnation of the comrades' inconsistent behaviour in the political and the personal sphere. It wasn't the right moment to attack men of the left, argued co-producer Lù Leone at the time. She also insisted that they wanted to maintain the focus on women (Troianelli 1978b: 46).

Again stressing the importance of women's issues, the film transforms the extremist political group of the novel into a group of feminist or, as they are called in the film, 'emancipated' women. As Maraini insisted during the film production, the fact that Vannina's diary in the novel is set in 1970 meant that her process of coming to awareness was not facilitated by her encounter with feminist groups, which did not really exist in Italy at that time (Anon. 1977a: 19). In the film, on the other hand, Vannina does, in fact, come into contact with members of the feminist movement. They are characterised by the way they dress and by their 'liberated' sexuality. In terms of political involvement, these emancipated women organise a festival of radio stations, and send Vannina to interview women in the poorest neighbourhoods of Naples about their work at home.

Thus, on the one hand, the members of the feminist movement in the film inherit the role of waking Vannina up to the reality of the lower classes that the novel had attributed to the extremist political movement. On the other hand, they also acquire some of the negative characteristics of the novel's male-dominated political group: their interest in ideals, and in general issues of liberation, makes the feminists in the film sometimes oblivious to the needs of individuals. They appear, at times, selfish, greedy, and too busy for personal friendships.

Mafalda, in particular, is shown as taking advantage of Suna when she asks her for money for their political cause, or she uses her home when

4 The film screenplay is only partly published in the book *Io sono mia* (Anon. 1977b). The selected scenes are preceded by a note which questions the publication of few scenes only, as well as the moment of publication, after 'the words have already become images' (Anon. 1977b: 26).

her own tent becomes too crowded, and particularly when she sets up Suna and Vannina for disaster by sending them ill-prepared to fill questionnaires among the women of Naples' poorest neighbourhoods. The most blatantly negative depiction of Mafalda in the film, however, appears toward the end, when a desperate Suna calls her early in the morning. Mafalda groggily replies that she is sleepy and asks Suna to call again later. Unable to make contact with any of her support people, Suna shortly afterwards commits suicide. The film clearly expresses the contrast between the situation of the feminist group and Suna's by juxtaposing a shot of the solidity of the Renaissance building in Rome, which the women of the feminist group are occupying, and the dangerous openness of Suna's villa on the cliffs, which underlines in contrast her own physical and emotional fragility.

Mafalda is the only character of the feminist group who is identified by name in the dialogues. *Io sono mia* glides over most of the events in which she is involved in the novel, notably a homosexual relationship with Suna. In fact the film, which had not hesitated to present images of marital and extramarital sex, masturbation and attempted rape, shies away from any explicit representation of a lesbian relationship. In the only moment of the film that may suggest an intimate relationship between the two women, Suna and Mafalda lay next to each other on top of a bed, while Mafalda encourages her friend not to get upset at Santino's betrayal and invites her to join in her political work. The scene then brusquely moves on to the episode of Giacinto's rape of Vannina. Interestingly enough, the screenplay directed that the scene, instead, end with the two women, their faces close, 'laughing and embracing tenderly' (Anon. 1977b: 54).⁴ The goodbye kiss that the two women share the following day, as Mafalda is leaving for Rome, may suggest an intimate relationship, which the dialogue, however, denies. Mafalda's words to Suna only refer to 'beliefs' and 'importance', not to personal feelings between them. At the time of the film's release, Scandurra maintained that they would have liked to represent female homosexuality in the film, but that they did not have enough space to create the right relationship between the two women, and did not want to take the focus away from Vannina (Troianelli 1978b: 46–47). It was not, she confirmed recently, a question of censorship (Scandurra 2005).

As Leone noted, Mafalda has acquired in the film a new significance compared to Suna, as a point of reference for Vannina, especially in her decision to have an abortion (Anon. 1977a: 19). The episode of the abortion in fact is probably the moment in which the feminist agenda of the film most deviates from the sense of the novel. In her diary, Vannina decides to have an abortion after first learning of Suna's suicide, and then awakening from a dream in which she sees herself first flying, then falling, then finally walking again thanks to crutches that Suna has given her. By her death, in sum, Suna gives Vannina the strength to make decisions and move on with her life.

Furthermore, Vannina does not agonise over the morality of terminating an unwanted pregnancy. Rather, the novel concentrates on the pain

the abortion gives her, and on the cruelty of the doctor performing it. In her entry for December 7, Vannina reports that Doctor Petal

thrust his hard, icy hands into my body. He opened me up, he ripped me apart and scraped me thoroughly. I bit my hands with clenched teeth to endure the brutal pain; I could feel the blood gushing out in streams from my tortured uterus. I fainted. I woke up again. The hours, the days, the years were passing by and the excavation never finished. All the pain in the world had accumulated at the bottom of my belly, amongst the torturer's metallic hands.

(Maraini 1988: 280–281)

The novel also mentions several other women who had abortions – all illegal, since the novel takes place in 1970, and abortion was not legalised in Italy until 1978. For all the women involved, abortion in the novel appears as a painful and inevitable fact of life, which leaves women alone, bleeding, without medical care or any physical or psychological help.

Shot in 1977, during the heat of the battles for the legalisation of voluntary interruption of pregnancy, the film greatly exploits the episode of Vannina's abortion, by creating a scene in which Vannina and Mafalda explicitly discuss a woman's decision to have an abortion. This scene is set immediately after Suna's suicide, but before Vannina learns about it, indicating that, contrary to the book, her decision is independent from Suna's death. Vannina looks for Mafalda at a festival which the latter is organising. Vannina declares her decision to abort, but also expresses doubts. She wants to terminate a pregnancy that her husband violently imposed on her. 'But isn't abortion an act of violence as well?', she wonders. Mafalda's response is a clear political statement: 'No, not anymore, if you decide to have one'.⁵ Again, the written screenplay had shown Mafalda more undecided in her answer to Vannina: 'Yes . . . No . . . It's not if you make the decision' (Anon. 1977b: 56).

This discussion of abortion which, unlike the novel, refers to an operation performed in a women-controlled, supportive environment is framed in the film by two declarations of desire for motherhood – one explicit, the other implicit. 'I would have liked to have a child', Vannina says to Mafalda, 'but now is not the time'. Later, after making an appointment for the following day with the women of the family planning centre, Vannina meets a woman with a small baby in her arms. As the screenplay explains, she 'smiles in the midst of her tears. She carefully picks up the baby, kisses it, and plays with it for a second. Then she gives it back to the woman and continues to walk alone' (Anon. 1977b: 58). Scandurra told me she added this scene to make sure that the audience understood that Vannina chose to abort in response to an act of violence, not as a denial of her desire of motherhood (Scandurra 2005). In contrast to the novel, there is no violence involved in the film's abortion, which leaves Vannina looking 'younger, perhaps more beautiful', in her husband's words. Even the last scene of the film underlines that Vannina's choice to leave her husband

5 Mafalda's 'No' was seen as 'superficial and false', Scandurra admitted in an interview; she, however, did not agree with that assessment (Troianelli 1978b: 45).

6 An exception was the review by Judith Slatin, who claimed that *Io sono mia* could be successful outside of Italy as well, and not only as a 'curiosity piece', but also because of the international appeal of its cast, and 'lastly but not least, because it's a pretty good movie' (Slatin 1978: 6).

and to have an abortion does not imply a refusal of motherhood. In the novel's final page Vannina closes the door of the temporary shelter offered by a colleague on her husband, finds herself surrounded by a noisy group of annoying, wounded animals, and realises that she quickly has to find a place to live. The film, on the other hand, shows Vannina affirming her identity and autonomy, her belonging to herself, to quote the title, but sharing this newly acquired awareness with a group of joyful, playful children. The song heard when the credits appear underlines the playfulness of the moment, but also the need to create a positive relationship with the new generation.

Upon its release, most reviews of *Io sono mia* were negative: one called it 'over-simplified, coarse, and ultimately mystifying' (Bellumori 1978: 152); most found the characterisation of the male protagonist Giacinto excessively negative (Grazzini 1980: 279). In fact, one reviewer noted that it was so extremely exaggerated that most female viewers would consider themselves lucky to have the partners they had, since they couldn't possibly be as bad as the husband in the film (Aspesi 1978). Others complained about the lack of a new, female cinematographical language (Bellumori 1978: 152); while still other reviewers commented on the 'choral' nature of the film, in which the collaborative effort overcame the director's intentions with a didactic, depersonalised effect (Cosulich 1978). Even those who supported the film called it 'melodramatic' (Cavicchioli 1978: 67).⁶

In many cases, the debate which ensued upon its release was on the definition of the film: was this a feminist film, or a feminine film? In an interview soon after its premiere, Scandurra declared that the film was directed to all women, not only to feminists, and that feminism began where the film ended (Troianelli 1978b: 50–51). In fact, the director and the crew ultimately admitted that the film actually had very little to offer women of the feminist movement – who in fact generally did not appreciate the film because they expected something different. Their target audience, Scandurra insisted, were the women who had not yet acquired an awareness of their condition of oppression (Anon. 1977a: 22). On the other hand, one reviewer commented, non-feminist women would probably look negatively upon the development of the protagonist, who, with her 'awakening', began to suffer all sorts of negative consequences: she became an adulteress; was beaten, physically attacked, and made pregnant against her will; she went through an abortion; in the end she lived in a basement room where even after the end of her teaching duties, her pupils kept on bothering her (Aspesi 1978).

Scandurra told me that one of the best memories she has of the release of the film, which she ended up being unhappy with, was the fact that she was invited to attend debates on the film in several different cities. Thus she also received direct feedback from her audience, often university students. The male students didn't like the characterisation of the male protagonist: he was excessively chauvinistic, they thought. The female students, on the other hand, complained about the characterisation of the

women in the film: in their opinion, they were interested in sex too much. Scandurra herself now finds that the film appears too concerned with sex. But, she adds, at the time it was a form of liberation (Scandurra 2005).

As for the crew itself, a final reflection on the film as a personal and professional experience of growth brought mixed responses. Many felt that working among women only brought about more solidarity, participation, and fewer power games. Others, on the contrary, complained that their expectations were not met, and ended up resenting the lack of freedom from traditional schemes, the lack of sincere spirit of collaboration, the 'sweet and personal' style of work, and the underlying criticism of some crew members toward others (Anon. 1977b: 8–12). All the women who answered agreed that they would repeat the experience, but many added a provision of 'selecting the crew mates', having 'a common political and human goal' or having 'a different structure and a common political/artistic will' (Anon. 1977b: 15). Most respondents claimed that more time to get to know each other would have been necessary to obtain better results, both from the point of view of the film and of their work as crew as well (Anon. 1977b: 16–17). Debates on the contradictions experienced in this all-female work experience and consciousness-raising sessions would have been helpful, some insisted, and wondered why they didn't happen (Anon. 1977b: 10). A 'missed chance' (Anon. 1977b: 8), summarised one of the crew members with a touch of bitterness.

Author Dacia Maraini did not take part in the shooting of the film, as she was working on her own documentary 'Ritratti di donne africane' (Anon. 1977b: 25). Reflecting on the comments of the crew members, however, she recognised the difficulty for women in the unusual experience of working with other women, as even in an all-female environment they are expected to use tools which historically have not belonged to them, and to create a product which must be directed to a market 'organized and run by male capitals' anyway (Anon. 1977b: 25). She finally recommended to continue with such experiments, even if the first ones were not entirely successful, in order to give birth to a new artistic language which would be able to express women's feelings and dreams (Anon. 1977b: 25).

In sum, *Io sono mia* generated much debate but had little success; not only from the point of view of its reception, but also from the crushed hopes that it would provide a way into the movie world for many women. It was the only film that Sofia Scandurra directed. She was so disillusioned after the experience that she moved to theatre direction – although recently she has gone back to the cinema world by opening and directing the Libera Università del Cinema, an independent film teaching institution near Rome. Both at the time of the film's release and more recently, Scandurra couldn't help but acknowledge that it would have been much easier to have worked with an all-professional crew than with an all-female crew in which so many members were new to the job. She did conclude, however, that they privileged the work relationships over the product, the

film. It's easier to work as a director by giving orders, and refusing criticism, she explained. She, on the other hand, had to discuss everything with the other women, and that had caused many difficulties. In a testimony given shortly after the film's shooting ended, Scandurra confessed: 'Many times, I cried. Often, I fought. I hated, with discretion. I killed . . . I killed my bourgeois origin and I feel grown up' (Anon. 1977b: 25). But then she added: 'if growing up at 13 is natural, at 40, it is vital' (Anon. 1977b: 25).

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Veó, veó; Leo, Leo?: A re(-)viewing of haptic and visual discourse in Bigas Luna's *Bilbao* (1978)

Abigail Loxham *University of Hull, Department of Spanish*

Abstract

This article investigates the trope of failing vision in Bigas Luna's 1978 film Bilbao as it equates to collapsing of dictatorship and an emergent dissident filmic practice. Engaging with the concept of tactile vision it posits that this recourse to sensory methods of vision, not traditionally associated with film, is the result of the search for an aesthetic capable of depicting a society in transition. The power previously thought to inhere in the cinematic gaze is interrogated as a more inclusive cinematography appeals to our sense of touch. Using the work of Laura Marks and Giuliana Bruno it explores the techniques which make this possible and highlights the slippage at work as a subversive tool in this enthralling post-dictatorship production.

Keywords

Bigas Luna
Spain
transition
tactile vision
embodied
spectatorship
cinematic identity

When I worked as a painter and designer I could touch what I was making.
When I started in cinema, I couldn't touch my films, my fetishistic instinct
and my love of objects felt abandoned.

(Bigas Luna, Cuca Canals, 1994: 5, my translation)

Bilbao (Bigas Luna 1978) emerges from a difficult period in Spain's cultural and political history. Franco's death in 1975 plunged a country into the most abject uncertainty which was not resolved until the election victory of the PSOE in 1982, now commonly acknowledged as marking the end of the difficult phase of the Transition. Periods of change, however, frequently entail innovative artistic production, which often questions its own nature and position within an equally uncertain social environment. It is within this context that we offer a reading of the film which will suggest a correlation between the emergence of Spain from dictatorship and a corresponding liberation implied by Bigas's creation of an innovative cinematic language.

The liminality implied by the interstitial period of the Transition anticipated a new type of cinema which not only placed itself at the borders but which also exploited the numerous thresholds associated with the cinematic art, refusing to remain confined by them. As such, frontiers – physical, cinematic and metaphorical – became crucial sites for renegotiation. And

precisely one of the central features of Bigas's deliberation in *Bilbao* is a critical reconsideration of the timeworn relation between power and vision. The film's exploration of one man's tenuous grasp of his own position as spectator comes to attest a lack of faith in the reputed primacy of the visual and elicits a similar critical revision of the power structures which this represents. It is my contention that, in its tentative marrying of two forms of creation – where haptic joins with visual – , *Bilbao* offers new possibilities for experience on collective and individual levels.

In conventional terms, viewing practices – particularly with respect to voyeurism – have served to illustrate and enforce dominant power structures. Spectatorial pleasure has been adduced to justify a cinematic practice, which has encouraged these tropes of enjoyment based on the derivation of pleasure through the power with which our gaze becomes imbued. As such, in its variance with these practices, *Bilbao* constitutes a dissident filmic essay as pre-existing configurations of power, reinforced by paradigmatic experiences of viewing, are questioned and a dysfunctional pursuit of one man's desire proves ultimately fatal. In this way, *Bilbao* is the beginning of a journey which leads this flamboyant auteur to repeatedly thwart spectatorial expectations and experiment with the seemingly endless potential of cinema to subvert, question and create.

This cinematic world is dark and perverse; and interpersonal relationships are immediately exposed as dysfunctional and unfulfilling. Leo (Angel Jové) lives with an older woman, María (María Martín) who besides being his sexual partner acts as his protector and receives money for doing so. Leo spends his days pursuing Bilbao (Isabel Pisano), a prostitute, through the streets of Barcelona. He pays her to perform oral sex but refuses to speak to her and expresses frustration when she tries to engage him in conversation. He repeatedly communicates the desire to possess her and, in true collector fashion, obsessively accumulates material reminders of her which he then arranges in bizarre *mises en scène* to photograph (the director's tactile manipulation of objects which can then be visually captured, as alluded to in the opening quotation.) His strange fantasies eventually lead him to kidnap Bilbao, drugging her and suspending her from the ceiling in a variety of bizarre poses before killing her accidentally by letting her head knock against a chair as he is moving her drugged body. He confesses his crime to María who helps him dispose of the body.

In terms of cinematic reception, viewing practices set within a psycho-analytic mode have long enjoyed a position of privilege in the theoretical hierarchy. The rhetoric of vision they privilege is dependent on the gaze and couched in terms of the Freudian distinction between voyeur and exhibitionist which claims the eye as a privileged (male) site of erotogenic pleasure. The aural appeal of film has also been duly acknowledged although, with some notable exceptions, this too is usually considered a supporting realm for the main appeal of the optical. Bigas initially pays lip service to the expectations of this orthodox mode of spectatorship as evinced by a series of subtle visual asides early in the film. A close up of

Bilbao's high heels, for example, seen from the point of view of Leo as she has sex with a client in a parked car parodies the function of the psycho-analytic fetish.

This type of viewing, however, fails Leo on two counts: the fetish does not placate his castration anxiety and he receives little satisfaction in his voyeuristic activities. It is in this way that Bigas begins the deconstruction of the power structures that Leo is set up to represent. In order to subvert established viewing positions and, by extension, expose unstable power relations the director reveals the capacity of film to interact with or at least evoke the functions of the other senses. The manners in which the moving image makes possible a tactile image have been variously explored by Giuliana Bruno and Laura Marks and their ideas create an enriching framework through which to read the innovation at work in *Bilbao*. These two scholars have emphasised sensory experimentation in moving images both as a means to extend meaning and also as a recourse for groups and individuals who have been excluded from dominant practices.

The sensorially holistic method of filmmaking explored in this, at times primitive, horror movie is indicative of the adventurous efforts to push back the boundaries which had confined cinema within the edges of a flat screen. This approach is both suggestive and inclusive and challenges the separateness of screen and spectator, hinting at the potential for them to enjoy and share a space of pleasurable (or otherwise) sensual experience. Subsequent films by this director – of far greater commercial impact – demonstrate a similar preoccupation with shared, somatic experience which Bigas incorporates into the image at every opportunity. The tactile potential of cinema evoked in *Bilbao* marks the beginnings of an affectionate relationship with all of the senses and the director's subsequent attempts to represent that which falls outside the realm of the solely visual.¹

Haptic apprehension of the city

Haptic discourse – in apposition to the purely visual – comes to the fore in this essay through the ways in which Leo relates to the city and to the object of his obsession. The most important elements of this reading are that of failed vision which gives way to the potential of tactile perception. In Leo's case his inability to relate visually or haptically to his surroundings results in frustration which the director relates more widely to the feelings of displacement and inner exile at work in the psyche of his protagonist. Coalescence of haptic and visual representation proffers alternative means of experience, a potential which resonates sharply with the wider socio-political context. Situating this film at such a precise moment in the rapidly changing history of a city, and a nation, provides a starting point for this reading of slippage and instability, making way for a positive renegotiation and redefinition of the cinematic subject.

Movement is an important function of Leo's apprehension of the city space and I refer to Giuliana Bruno's explanation of haptic space within film as it is predicated on this notion of dynamism. Bruno explains her

1 We might posit the very peculiar evocation of food and taste which take up an increasingly central position in his later films not so much in the topos of the association of alimentation and carnal satisfaction but in the coarse, tactile delight of culinary preparation so prevalent in *Jamón jamón* (1992) and especially *Bámbola* (1996).

derivation of this term and its relation to motion pictures in the following words:

As the Greek etymology tells us, haptic means 'able to come into contact with'. As a function of the skin, then, the haptic – the sense of touch – constitutes the reciprocal contact between us and the environment, both housing and extending communicative interface. But the haptic is also related to kinesthesia, the ability of our bodies to sense their own movement in space. [. . .] Here, the haptic realm is shown to play a tangible, tactical role in our communicative 'sense' of spatiality and motility, thus shaping the texture of habitable space and, ultimately mapping our ways of being in touch with the environment.

(Bruno 2002: 6)

Leo's inhabitation of the city, portrayed as a marginal activity, highlights this motility and its associated sensory merging in its emphasis on the combination of touch and vision. Close-ups of eyes and bodies within this film mean that previous theories of visual enjoyment are subject to cinematic revision as other senses are drawn into the arena of film. One of the film's opening sequences sees Leo travelling around Barcelona on the metro and then the bus. These crowded forms of transport are metonymic of the way in which we travel around the city and their use in this context highlights a stylistic endeavour to immerse the filmic subject in their immediate environment.

The movement of this transport and the contours of buildings and people in this environment highlight the depth of the cinematic image extending the possibilities of representation beyond the usual visual plane. The proximity of the people packed into these uniquely urban forms of transportation is recorded by a camera that mingles with them in its observance of Leo's trajectory around the metropolis. Separation is not possible because of the nature of these crowded vehicles. Distance as constitutive of perspective and in its relation to comprehension in the aesthetic tradition of cinema is disavowed by these passages. Thus from the very first sequences a mistrust of vision is registered and the spectator, like the photophobic Leo, is obliged to consider alternative modes of comprehension.

Cohabitation with the city in this respect, encouraging a recognition of its encroachment on all the senses, emphasises touch and fragmentation. The city alters the field of vision and the individual walking the streets is engulfed by crowded cityscapes. In *Bilbao* this loss of perspective is indicative of the limitations of the field of visual observation. The camera's proximity to its subject renders it unable to fulfil its expected function and allies it with Leo's photographic camera. Promoting mistrust of technological mediations of vision in this way is a deliberately self-reflexive musing on the limitations of this chosen medium. In depictions of Leo's sexual encounters with both of his women the director opts for close ups of faces rather than focussing on the act itself, not only removing these episodes

from accusations of gratuitous voyeurism but once more disavowing the supremacy of vision implicated in conventional representation.²

The dynamism that Bruno sets out as integral to a haptic relationship with space is clear in these outdoor city sequences. The close-ups that persist in the claustrophobic domestic surroundings which Leo shares with Maria are recorded by a relatively static camera but are – like the city scenes – experienced via the protagonist's corporeal relationship to these his environs, their depiction centres on touch and contact. Washing, teeth cleaning, affixing plasters and eating are examples of the physical relationship at work in this domestic space. These activities are accompanied by harsh diegetic tonalities which emphasise the roughness of touch in opposition to the more conventional choice of melodic pieces, the conventional intensifier of amorous sequences.

A perspective which oscillates between voyeuristic shots from a distance and discomfiting close-up is complicit in the representation of these two types of vision. Laura Marks sets out a functional relationship between these two modes of perception as operating in a dialectical relationship: 'The difference between haptic and optic visuality is a matter of degree, however. In most processes of seeing both are involved in a dialectical movement from far to near, from solely optical to multisensory' (Marks 2002: 3). This is posited as a way of entering into a relationship with the film that exceeds vision and breaks with previous tropes of viewing. Bruno offers her definition as a route towards a feminine spatial practice that departs from a patriarchal tradition that has tended to exclude feminine experience.

Neither of these explanations fit entirely with this particular artistic project although the notion of emancipation from patriarchy is common to both. Where they do intersect is in the rejection of the traditional when it is no longer sufficient to represent new experience. Alternatives are not established solely as a reversal of a previous convention, a simple turning on its head of an existing set of power relations, rather this is a more fluid and labile approach to the construction of subjectivity within the space of cinema; an approach which allows for a relocation of the subject that is not solely guided by the look but in its inclusion of a wider sensory perceptual field becomes a more inclusive and flexible experience.

The limits of vision

It is frequently assumed that a haptic mode of perception more closely involves spectatorial interaction with the screen; an acknowledgement that film viewing is not solely a detached cognitive process based on images experienced visually and aurally but also makes possible embodied perception. Rather than reading this as the limits of vision it might be better welcomed as a latent imagining of unending possibilities for both representation and appreciation as Vivian Sobchack explains:

Even at the movies our vision and hearing are informed and given meaning by our other modes of sensory access to the world: our capacity not only to

2 A perspective adopted once again to great effect in *Son de mar* (2001) where the love-making sequence is filmed by a single static camera fixed insistently on the face of Leonor Watling obviating the intricate visuality in editing and lighting as preferred by the norm.

see and hear but also to touch, to smell, to taste, and always to proprioceptively feel our weight, dimension, gravity, and movement in the world.

(Sobchack 2004: 60)

At the very least the techniques which challenge visual means of appreciation or provide alternative routes towards comprehension of filmic space are often formulated and shot with scant regard for the presumed comfort of the spectator. Whilst we do not actually touch the screen the element of contagion and implication is encompassed by these modalities which linger too long on the uncomfortable detail and compromise personal space with excessive proximity, getting so close that our ability to focus on separate objects is removed.

It is through Leo that we are made aware of the alternative possibilities which the senses promote. Yet this same figure is a malfunctioning spectator and subject: he himself proves unable to decode these alternatives. Haptic appreciation of space presumes an immersion in that space and a concomitant loosening of the ties by which we are rooted to a secure understanding of our subjectivity. Marks writes:

Like the Renaissance perspective that is their progenitor, cinema's optical images address a viewer who is distant, distinct, and disembodied. Haptic images invite the viewer to dissolve his or her subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image. [. . .] The viewer is called on to fill in the gaps in the image, engage with the traces the image leaves.

(Marks 2002 : 13)

Just as in this type of spectatorship we are called into a different relationship with the world so Leo is forced to accept a certain permeable relationship between himself and his environment. However, his demeanour suggests a total resistance to any kind of interpersonal relations: a tightly fastened coat and sunglasses protect him from the contamination of his environment. His obscured eyes hint at the naivety of the child who covers his face and believes that he is hidden from view, protected from the penetrative gaze of the outside world which exceeds his control.

Thus it becomes apparent that neither touch nor vision will resolve the lack of control for Leo. The two modes of perception are interlaced and presented as an enticing possibility for interaction with a cinematic screen that need not represent the distant space of fantasy but hints at a physical immersion, which assumes an experiential, almost phenomenological, appreciation.

The representation is problematised because Leo appears not to have learnt how to appreciate or read either sense. His clumsy handling of Bilbao which causes her death would indicate a similar 'tactile blindness' on his part. This results in a lack of reciprocity in his relations with the two women of the film. Leo feels that the inevitable acceptance of recognising other subjects outside of our control and with whom we must interact is a threat to his subjectivity. His refusal to answer María's questions

and repeated desire that Bilbao should not talk to him are proof of his attempts to remain separate, giving nothing of himself. He assumes that the objects, which succumb to his handling and manipulation, are merely material extensions of himself and once he appropriates them they stand for examples of the power he is able to wield over them. As Bigas reveals these beliefs to be delusional, he places the subject's position in a material world in doubt, whilst revelling in the possibility of an enriched and enriching sensory relationship with and in the world.

Within such an overtly solipsistic narrative the movement away from optical discourse initially is an acknowledgement that Leo's eyes do not function as the tool of power and understanding that film theory had previously set them up to be, particularly with regard to the male gaze as it has been formulated within the psychoanalytic mode of criticism. The significance of his sexual obsession with this woman highlights this and whilst Leo is still afforded a subjective look the power that was previously assumed to be part and parcel of that look is now missing. Leo's disempowerment engenders a metaphor of the crumbling patriarchal structure that he represents. As we have acknowledged *Bilbao* is undoubtedly a product of the political and social change at work in Spain at the time of its making. Leo is a displaced subject and when the cracks produced by vision are exposed haptic visuality seems to attempt to fill the void caused by the displacement produced by the chaotic uncertainty of the Transition.

Touching the object of desire

The desire to look whilst simultaneously remaining invisible has long been postulated as the impetus for a primarily voyeuristic practice of film viewing. Revisitation of the psychoanalytic paradigm of desire as it functions through the scopophilic model extends the possibilities for interpretation of desire and identification. Whilst haptic visuality exposes this looking as limited it also promotes a new type of viewing pleasure, dependent on our experiences of our own bodily inhabitation of the world. During long sections of this film we are denied a coherent image as shadows and patches of darkness obscure detail on the screen. This type of "vision" is less dependent on mastery and more an acknowledgement of new and more fluid types of subjectivity.

In this respect the tactile approaches made by Leo are based on a misunderstanding. Filmically they refute the idea that mastery inheres in vision; but his desire for mastery and control cannot be accommodated through recourse to touch. Touch in *Bilbao* functions on two levels. Firstly it is the means by which the protagonist experiences the city: when he realises he is unable to capture it visually, contact becomes the only means by which he can 'make-sense' of it. It is when spying on the object of his affection is exposed as insufficient that he takes refuge in material reminders of her. Following her through Barcelona is not solely a means of optical control but has a distinctly physical and corporeal function. This is an acknowledgement of the traces that reside in material objects as the result of a kinesthetic inhabitation of the city's streets.

Bilbao, for Leo at least, is representative of the city of Barcelona: she is a streetwalker, part of the metropolis's seedy underworld. Leo is left following her trace, replacing the encounter with her by numerous encounters with replacement objects and with the map of her route through the Catalan capital. As he traverses the city and experiences repeatedly frustrating encounters with the prostitute the director's method of filming represents both Leo's psychological condition at the same time as exposing the instability of vision. When he fails to hold Bilbao in his gaze he looks for replacement objects in order to hold her in his hand. Long sequences that follow him through Barcelona describe his attempts to find fetishes through which to appropriate a substitute for the body of the object of his obsession. Action in these sequences unfolds slowly and is driven by the sparsest of dialogue, usually Leo's voiceover.

There are several instances in which we see Leo's actions before he describes them to us, adding interest to the aural domain and its slippery relation to the visual. This use of voice-over, a standard omniscient form of discourse in cinema is compromised in this instance in its accompaniment by diegetically tactile noises, unmediated in the soundtrack. Another example of this director's subversion of cinematic convention presents Leo – this time by means of this voice-over – as no longer dominant but enfeebled and requiring the complicity of others who collude to save him. Furthermore, the voiceover in the Castilian original is not that of Angel Jové, who does provide the voice in the Catalan version, a blatant challenge to the supremacy of the aural domain. Leo's commentary is unreliable and his actions are exposed as futile.

In relation to the function of the fetish as able to represent in Marks's words 'the material conditions of displacement' (Marks 2000: 79) the objects themselves become the closest Leo can get to the physical presence of the object of his desire. The importance of these objects is in the power he can wield over them through touch. As Marks elaborates 'All fetishes are translations into a material object of some sort of affect[. . .] theories of fetishism describe how value comes to inhere in objects that is not reducible to commodification (Marks 2000: 80). Leo's relationship with this woman is exposed as dysfunctional when he fails to grasp the meaning of these objects and returns to the visual, taking photographs of them that he then obsessively handles, arranges and re-arranges, perhaps in a further futile attempt to impose meaning.

Lingering close-ups of hands evoke their function as an important interface between self and world; hands are certainly important as representative of contact for Leo but they are portrayed as unreliable in the same way as his eyes. Not only optically challenged he appears to be touch blind also. Through an emphasis on texture, typical of the style of this director, these objects become integral to this cineaste's multi-sensory aesthetic project and acknowledge once more the tactile potential of the cinematic image. Leo's hands are the vehicles by which the spectator appreciates this textural variety: from the nylon fabric of tights which he

stuffs with crackling, crumpled paper to the smooth shiny surfaces of his photographs and the scaly fish in whose mouth he places a sausage (in a thinly disguised imitation of the sex act he has recently engaged in with Bilbao). This spectrum of textures generates images of depth even as they play with surface and superficial structure. Engaging with vision at the surface in this way is a feature of haptic visuality which allows for a widened appreciation of the spectatorial experience. A technique which in this instance acknowledges the material qualities of the objects and derives pleasure from these qualities when meaning cannot be grasped.

This sensual approach is primarily stimulated by a frustration with the visual domain, and with the assumption of power that film theory previously embedded within it. Bigas sets out at first to expose this power structure as unstable. He sets up his male protagonist as exaggerated voyeur, trailing his object of desire in trench coat and sunglasses. Here there are hints of the parodic excess for which this boisterous Catalan has since become renowned. Many of the visual contradictions in the film stem from the cross-cuts which alternate between extreme close-ups shot from Leo's point of view, apparently as though we were to be afforded a privileged perspective which we may share with him in his status as the epitome of the filmic voyeur. Nonetheless, these close ups have no revelatory function being too close for optical focus. They plunge us deeper into a confusing, multisensory urban environment.

Re-shaping a cultural memory manipulated by the previous homogeneous period of hegemonic discourse may be one reason for experimentation with haptic visuality and the interrogation of traditional style and technique in *Bilbao*. Complacent spectatorship is certainly resisted in the uncomfortable perversions and their harsh electronic musical accompaniment throughout the work. The premise of dislocation and a resulting detachment from previous artistic paradigms lead *Bilbao* to explore its position in a changing context via a widened experience of sensory potential; it is the result of the disaffection of a dissident and emerging voice. The challenge to optical supremacy is also a challenge to rigid representation of the many different identities encompassed by film. Leo's displacement enacts the situation of the film and the director's refusal to grant him optical or tactical understanding opens the way for a more fluid concept of the negotiation of space and the senses within the cinematic world. In the movement from haptic to visual, previous power structures are interrogated and destabilised opening the way for a new appreciation of this work.

A resistance to an anchoring of the signifier to signified by this daring reformulation of the semiotic codes related to cinematographic technique is evidenced not solely in the adventurous experiments with tactile vision. The nomenclature is carefully selected for its connotative value and relation to two significant sites of political conflict and proves that this slippage is integral to this film. The identity of Barcelona and Bilbao as centres of dissidence under the regime ensures that their linking in this way – via the film's title and location – enables them to flout their newly won freedom. Franco's

destruction of these two cities was the result of a combination of appropriation and neglect possible because of the collusion of those implicated in the support of the director's moribund authority. Leo's unhealthy pursuit of Bilbao, which leads to her murder, is facilitated by the same collusion and is the result of a similar combination of (mis)appropriation and inadequacy.

Further evidence of the significance of nomenclature comes in the form of the inevitable evocation of Da Vinci – or Leonardo as he is known to Spaniards. In contrast to his namesake, the renaissance man knew how to read nature and represent it creatively (rather than fetishistically) and understood proportion and perspective, especially in terms of visual creation. Indeed, his iconic 'Vitruvian Man' is generally considered as emblematic of his artistic and scientific understanding of the world which combines to transcend earthly limitations in a manner that Bigas Luna – at the time better known as a graphic artist – also advocates but which Leo is unable to either employ or take advantage of.

At the time of the film's production, the erosion of the power of the centralist state had opened the way for the re-emergence of previously marginalised voices. With the advent of democracy came an acknowledgement of plurality, a stark contrast to the cultural homogeneity enforced previously. The country was in flux and power structures were subject to modification. The country was now free to experiment and negotiate with alternative representations of identity which not only challenged previous restrictions but interrogated those same artistic conventions employed for their promotion. *Bilbao* embodies both facets of this newly discovered liberty it revels in the potential for innovative methods of representation and, in turn, with the perplexed meanderings of its protagonist initiates an uncertain relationship between touch and meaning. Similarly, languages and cultures which were previously compartmentalised and archived re-emerged to challenge the unitarian ideal of 'Spanishness', disregarding the strictures and definitions which preceded them.

Any process of change necessarily makes visible gaps and fissures as it tries to overcome them. These are used by Bigas to create alternative meanings consonant with his acknowledgement of the collapse of preceding values and his revision of them. The resulting discourse at work, together with the shifts between optical and haptic visuality open up a new space for a renegotiation of subjectivity simultaneously destabilising previous filmic paradigms. The 'sliding relationship' set out by Marks is indicative of the formal slippage which is an integral element of Bigas Luna's style with significant ideological implications. It is an example of the way in which Spain's cinematic production began to seep beyond traditional and accepted cinematic practice to embrace alternative representational methods.

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Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, transatlantic thresholds and transcendental homelessness

Ian Roberts *University of Leicester*

Abstract

Recent work with the less well-known films of the German director F.W. Murnau (1888–1931) confirms that his was a career of singular artistic vision as well as outstanding technical innovation. His works consistently explore concepts which echo Georg Lukács' notion of transcendental homelessness, where film is the medium best suited to throw light on the inner restlessness of the modern psyche. From Walk in the Night to Tabu, individuals' peaceful lives are thrown into disequilibrium by external forces. Uniquely in Germany's Golden Era of film in the 1920s, Murnau set his creative team the challenge of solving countless technical issues, the better to externalise his protagonists' inner turmoil. His great films, The Last Laugh (1924), Faust (1926) and Sunrise (1929) all demonstrate how ably he manipulated the new entertainment medium and lent it an artistic legitimacy few others have achieved. Upon his death in 1931 Charlie Chaplin declared Murnau 'the best man Germany ever sent to Hollywood', while Fritz Lang stated 'a pioneer has left us in the midst of his creativity'. This article examines both the themes and the techniques employed by Murnau, which have elevated him to the status of incomparable film pioneer.

Keywords

Murnau
innovation
Weimar Expressionism
unchained camera

Despite a reputation as one of the foremost directors in the history of film, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau has been notoriously difficult to pin down academically. In a career which spanned little more than ten years Murnau produced some of the most lasting images in film, and contributed in no small measure to establishing film as a serious artistic movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet Murnau's contribution to the early history of film seems to have been overlooked in comparison to the likes of Fritz Lang or G.W. Pabst. David Thomson once commented: 'Murnau is a neglected master', before going on to offer a possible explanation for this curious fact, 'but he does not lend himself easily to massive interpretation' (Thomson 1994: 532).

The discovery in recent years of films hitherto considered lost, and the painstaking restoration of negatives which were previously of poor quality, allows us to evaluate more of Murnau's early work, and to re-evaluate his later films, in order to better understand the development of his style as well as to trace some common themes and techniques right across his

1 I am indebted to the staff of the Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Stiftung in Wiesbaden, Germany, for their kind assistance to me during a visit there in April 2005, and for granting me access to material currently still undergoing restoration.

2 See Thomas Koebner, 'Der romantische Preuße', in Prinzler (2003), pp. 9–52, especially p. 19, where Koebner also draws this parallel.

career.¹ Crucially, Murnau's filmmaking reflects the well-known concept of 'transcendental homelessness', a term first coined by Georg Lukács to define creativity and the novel in the modern age.² The director appears compelled to produce films portraying individual trauma and social turmoil as a reflection of the *zeitgeist* in 1920s Germany. To this restlessness, Murnau applied an unparalleled understanding of art, and a radical approach to the problems of this fledgling artistic medium, to create some of the most abiding images in the history of early filmmaking. Moreover, such tendencies appear in films produced at all times in his career, and on both sides of the Atlantic.

Born Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe on 28 December 1888, to respectable bourgeois parents Heinrich and Ottilie (who hoped that their son might study to become a teacher), Murnau was reputedly drawn to the theatre at an early age. Even as a child, his brother Robert recalled, Friedrich loved to play with a puppet theatre given to him one Christmas, and later he would mobilise his whole family to stage small plays, including some written by himself, in his home near Kassel. This theatrical bent was instrumental in his decision to abandon his university studies in 1911, instead to join Max Reinhardt's experimental (and highly influential), *Deutsches Theater* in Berlin. Around the same time he abandoned his bourgeois surname in favour of Murnau, after the Alpine village where he mixed with prominent avant garde artists of the day, including Franz Marc (of the Blue Rider group), and the poet Else Lasker-Schüler.

Even the intervention of the First World War did not hold Murnau back for long. In 1917, after serving as an infantry officer on both the Western and the Eastern fronts, then as an aerial observer in France, a navigational error led to his internment in neutral Switzerland. Interned German officers were granted free movement on parole, and so he was able to involve himself in stage production in Lucerne. Clearly he was drawn to this aspect of the creative process, and contemporary reviews praise his vision and his innovation. In retrospect Murnau always claimed that this was the start of the process which led him to filmmaking, but the exact details of his return to Germany at the end of the war are sketchy. What is known is that along with friends such as Robert Wiene and Conrad Veidt, he founded a film company, the 'Murnau Veidt Filmgesellschaft' in Berlin in 1919.

Murnau's first six films remain lost, but contemporary reviews indicate that his was an innovative approach to the fledgling industry. Upon the release of his fifth film *Der Januskopf/The Head of Janus* in 1920, billed as 'a tragedy on the fringes of reality', one Berlin critic raved: 'The director F. W. Murnau has well captured the vibrant fantasies of the scriptwriter. The [...] action in open scenes is a technical masterpiece of quite perfect execution. It is here that film is superior to the theatre' (Kreimeier 1988: 22).

Indeed Murnau was quite certain in his own mind that film was more than cheap variety entertainment, but rather that it offered far greater potential as an artistic medium than theatre. To Murnau, film was the ideal creative vehicle, perfectly suited to revealing the inner processes of

the human psyche. Although it is Robert Wiene who is credited with first employing expressionist techniques to portray a protagonist's inner turmoil in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Murnau was seeking to do this in every film he directed. In an interview of 1928 he summed up his feelings with clarity: 'In every one of my films I am trying to discover new artistic territory, and to find new forms of artistic expression' (Kreimeier 1988: 101).

But what inner process can we identify in these films, indeed in many of the films produced during Germany's Golden Era after 1920? What was the creative impulse for those early pioneers of an industry which we now take for granted? Although the radical theories of Sigmund Freud had possibly not filtered into common thinking by the 1920s, the new century had seen a growing interest in the workings of the mind, and the tragic events of the First World War had contributed to the sense that the human being was constantly torn between conflicting mental states, particularly in Germany. Even a limited exploration of the art and literature of the German Expressionists before and after WWI reveals the all-embracing sense of resignation and loss, of the transition from optimism to pessimism present in so many of their works.

Murnau's own credentials as a transcendental vagrant are impressive. He had displayed a spiritual and physical restlessness from a very early age. His brother recalls how Murnau would take every opportunity to travel around Europe, with Paris and its art treasures proving particularly attractive. During his abortive period as a student, too, Murnau changed courses, and universities, more than once before finally abandoning academia altogether. And then there was his adopted spiritual home of Murnau in Upper Bavaria, which provided at least temporary relief from the real world of familial expectations and academic pressure. Years later, during the sailing trip to the Pacific islands which would result in *Tabu* (1931), Murnau wrote to his mother 'I am at home in no house and in no country' (Eisner 1973: 13), revealing the extent of his career-long rootlessness. The concept of transcendental homelessness proposed by Lukács seems ideally suited to sum up the way in which Murnau sought to portray lost individuals who had spurned, or at least failed to recognise, a source of happiness and found themselves instead thrown into turmoil and angst. In a nation which had struggled to come to terms with military defeat, and suffered economic catastrophe and political revolt in the early years of the Weimar Republic, Murnau's films might well have struck a unique chord within a German audience.

From the very outset, Murnau attempted to make apparent these hidden turmoils through the images he projected onto the screen. And for Murnau only technical innovation within the young medium could achieve the realisation of these thematic portrayals. When *Phantom* was released in 1922, the critic of the *Film-Kurier* Ernst Ulitzsch wrote: 'Murnau, the greatest hope of this generation of young directors [. . .] makes manifest the frantic fantasy of a tormented man, transforms the illusions of a hallucinatory mind into pictures' (Prinzler 2003: 148).

A sense of transcendental crisis is apparent in virtually every film that has survived to the present day. Contemporary reviews of those films now considered as missing do nothing to dispel this assumption. In essence, each film depicts individuals who experience great upheaval in the private sphere of their lives: characters become infatuated with an unobtainable love, they dream of escaping a bourgeois profession to become poets, their ordered lives are shattered by real or imagined horrors which crowd in on them. In short, the comfortable equilibrium of their quotidian existence is knocked awry; and it is this state of disarray which Murnau set out to portray.

In *Der Gang in die Nacht/Walk in the Night* (1920), for instance, the first of Murnau's surviving films, the eminently respectable doctor Boerne falls unexpectedly in love with the dancer Lily. He ends his engagement to the passive Helene and makes a home for himself and his lover on the coast. Eventually, though, he is forced to watch helplessly as he loses Lily to the young, blind artist who comes to the village to be healed. A similar theme is taken up in Murnau's first film to be produced in the United States, *Sunrise* (1927) where the simple love of the farm couple is shattered by the arrival of the city vamp (I shall return to *Sunrise* later). Likewise, the town clerk Lorenz in the 1922 film *Phantom* is blind to the love of the bookbinder's daughter Marie Starke and becomes obsessed with Veronika Harlan, the daughter of a rich merchant in the town. He then transfers his obsession to Melitta, the scheming daughter of a poor countess, who leads him to squander huge sums of money in the fruitless pursuit of temporary status and happiness. Ultimately this mania leads to murder, and then to prison.

Sometimes the threat to equilibrium comes from outside the individual's own sphere. In the case of Murnau's two 'horror' movies *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Faust* (1926) the threat is presented by a vampire and the devil, respectively, both of whom leave a trail of misery affecting far more than just the films' protagonists Hutter and Faust. In *Der letzte Mann/The Last Laugh* (1924), probably Murnau's best-known film, Emil Jannings' porter faces both material ruin and loss of status when he loses his job and thereby his uniform. Finally, in *Tabu*, Murnau's last film before his death, the love of the young Polynesian couple is cut cruelly short by a religious edict, which declares the young girl 'taboo' and thus beyond earthly pleasure.

What is perhaps surprising about Murnau's films, when one lists the tribulations placed in the path of his protagonists, is how often he is able to offer the possibility of hope, if not always redemption: thus Lorenz Lobota in *Phantom*, for instance, is so overwhelmed with his manic obsession that his entire personality is changed. In the end he is imprisoned for murdering his aunt in an attempt to get more money to fund his obsession. And yet, as he leaves prison, who should be waiting for him but the appropriately named Marie Starke (from the German for 'strong'). The film ends with the couple reconciled amongst the apple blossom of their (respectably bourgeois) home. Likewise, Ellen's willingness to sacrifice herself for the sake of her husband Hutter means that the threat of *Nosferatu* is finally

negated; indeed, her selflessness liberates the entire town which has been in the grip of the plague carried there by the vampire. In *Faust* too, Gretchen's love contributes to the hero's decision to reject the devil, and they enjoy a reconciliation amongst imagined blossom. Most controversially, in the happy end which was tacked-on at the request of the film's producer Erich Pommer, the porter in *The Last Laugh* is able not only to regain his former status, but also to become a man of substance in an epilogue, which shows him unexpectedly inheriting the fortune of an American businessman. However, these happy endings notwithstanding, there is always the feeling that this reasserted equilibrium, bringing new happiness to the protagonists, could be disrupted at some point in the future. Paradise may be regained, but there is nothing in a Murnau film to suggest that complacency might not lead to its loss a second time.

Much that has been discussed above does not necessarily raise Murnau above the status of many other filmmakers of the 1920s. At best, the plot elements outlined here indicate the hand of an above-average storyteller with a penchant for the romantic, the melodramatic, perhaps even the pathetic. Certainly many saw in Murnau one of Germany's better 'Kammerspiel' film directors. What astonished contemporary critics and audiences, however, and what ushers Murnau into the pantheon of great filmmakers, is his innovative approach to the technical issues of filmmaking in the very earliest days of film as a narrative medium.

Considering *Walk in the Night* was already Murnau's sixth film, but the first to which we have access today, we must rely on contemporary reviews of the earlier films to see that a range of technical innovations were present virtually from the outset in Murnau's creative work. In this manner his thematic treatments are enhanced and augmented by techniques which still impress today. An instinctive grasp of art history, his mastery of the use of the camera lens to frame and to focus, of the editing techniques necessary to hold the audience's attention and to lead the viewer into the mind of the protagonist, coupled with an enquiring nature which was constantly seeking new ways to develop the medium, all contribute to film sequences which amazed contemporary critics, dismayed his rivals, and which are still relied upon as standard filmmaking and narrative techniques today.³

In terms of the images themselves, Murnau proved himself to be a master of mise en scène, and of editing, at a time when many other filmmakers were content to achieve little more than filmed theatre. The arrival of the blind artist in *Walk in the Night* for instance, is framed by an opening oval iris out, where the figure standing erect in the boat against a glassy sea prefigures the storms which will soon buffet the doctor and his lover. The effect is again achieved by the use of the arches in the castle to frame the moment when the vampire Count Orlok first appears to Hutter, even as his young bride is terrified by premonitions of Hutter's peril. Often in these and other films, such highly stylised images are then immediately contrasted with extreme close-ups of the protagonists' faces as they react

3 Some critics still question the extent to which Murnau is responsible for the visual style of his films. Crucially, his scriptwriters, cameramen and set designers in their various reminiscences all refer to his talent and his inexhaustible energy to coordinate his team's creative input.

to these threats. It must be acknowledged that such shots are informed by artistic predecessors in other, more established branches of the arts. Murnau's lone figures gazing out to sea recall the Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, for instance, while the artful placement of townsfolk in *Faust* revelling in the face of the all-consuming plague reflects the apocalyptic paintings of Hieronymous Bosch, for example. Closer to Murnau's own time, a more formal use of lines and shadows make this director a far more subtle exponent of Expressionism than his more famous counterpart Robert Wiene. In *Schloß Vogelöd/Castle Vogelöd* (1921) and *Phantom* the Gothic curves of the arches seen in other films give way to the geometric formalism of tall rooms, long corridors and shadows cast by the cross-frames of the windows. Both techniques, though, make it all-too apparent that the characters caught within these images are helpless victims of their fates, filmic lambs to the slaughter who wait passively for their lives to be ruined.

Furthermore, Murnau's theatrical training seems to have led him to revel in the possibilities presented by exploiting the depth of the images he shot for the screen. Constantly the viewer's eye is invited to wander from the foreground, where the protagonists see their worlds crumbling, to the very rear of the image, as unrelated, innocuous activities are depicted. And finally there is a breadth to Murnau's scenes which can literally take the breath away. His landscapes, in particular, encompass huge swathes of land, sea or sky. Yet they too contribute to the sense of unbalance, whether in the images of the Carpathian mountains in *Nosferatu*, or the stormy seas of *Walk in the Night*. Each one of Murnau's scenes is skilfully interwoven with close-ups of the characters and their milieu, to add to the sense of latent doom.

Yet at this point one might still be forgiven for thinking that Murnau is at best a gifted photographer, utilising his theatrical experience to its utmost to create films which are, certainly, the best artistry of their time. To establish Murnau's preeminence over contemporary and successor alike it is necessary to analyse his notable achievements in the use of the camera to free the viewer's mind from the static, two-dimensional representation of the painting or even the physical limitations of the theatre set. Instead, how was he able to make the film more akin to literature in its ability to transport the viewer to a different realm? It is in the field of the technical tricks that Murnau's real contribution to film on both sides of the Atlantic begins. Here we see a director who drew from his own experience of art history and the theatre, and added a vivid imagination unfettered by conventional thinking and filmmaking. Taken together, these qualities allowed Murnau to reach into the inner world of his protagonists, so that he was able not just to portray the forces which threatened the equilibrium of his everyday bourgeois heroes, but also to depict the effect these outside agencies had on the psyche of these individuals.

Not all of the techniques employed by Murnau were new. Thus, for example, soft focus and dissolves are employed to great effect in both

Phantom and *The Last Laugh*. But in both cases they allow Murnau to tell his story far more effectively than had hitherto been achieved by directors. He employs these effects to enhance the narrative, not just as space-filling gags to wow the audience. In *Phantom*, both elements combine to allow flashbacks, which although not new, was still a risky narrative technique with an audience still essentially film-illiterate. A dissolve is also utilised to show the early stages of Lubota's mental collapse as he is haunted by the phantom appearance of Veronika's pony trap. In *The Last Laugh* this technique is perfected when the porter drunkenly sees the room dissolve, sway and blur before his very eyes. Likewise the use of the delayed exposure and stop-motion photography enhances the mood (German: *Stimmung*) of a piece, such as when the sail covering the ship's hold rolls back of its own volition as Nosferatu rises silently onto the deck. Again, the technique is not necessarily new, but it was employed here by Murnau in order to heighten the tension greatly, by revealing the supernatural powers at work as the pestilence-bearing vampire arrives in Ellen's home town.

Two techniques in particular, then, might properly be called Murnau's own; both involve camera movement at a time when most films used static shots, giving rise to the concept of the 'unlocked camera' and contributing most fully to Murnau's reputation as one of the greats of filmmaking. Whilst some examples (which I will discuss here) are well known from Murnau's later films, it is surprising to discover examples in some of the earlier, previously lost, films of the first years of the 1920s. One such example occurs in *Phantom*, so at least as early as 1922. The protagonist Lorenz has begun the descent into madness. He has fallen in love with Veronika, suffered rejection, and subsequently transferred his obsession onto the vamp Melitta. He has borrowed RM60,000 to feed his mania, and is desperate to resolve the growing crisis which he is facing. As he walks through the town the burden of his debt, and the enormity of his desperate situation transform the houses themselves into a dark forest, or lurking animals, ready to pounce upon him. He cowers as the buildings themselves are seen to lean over him, their shadows reaching across him and threatening to harm him.⁴ He runs away, and the street returns to normal. This is crucial precisely because the technique makes it apparent that Lorenz alone experiences the street in this way; it is effectively no more than his own mental state projected onto the houses past which he is walking. In actual fact the technique was achieved by building a set where the flats on one side of the street actually pivoted, combined with the careful placing of the camera and lighting to create the effect of motion. Murnau repeated the technique to very great effect just a few years later when depicting the porter's fall from grace in *The Last Laugh*.

But this technique is essentially no more than the illusion of movement. From the very beginning Murnau experimented with techniques to allow the camera itself to move. It must be remembered that we are dealing with a time when the entire ensemble required more than one

4 This is an interesting prefiguration of the shadow of the vampire's claws as they reach out to claim Ellen in *Nosferatu*.

- 5 Although straightforward, both situations were repeated in *The Last Laugh* and *Sunrise*, to very great effect.
- 6 The image of the newspaper article announcing the death of the doorman's rich benefactor might also be considered an intertitle of course, albeit a less obvious one.

man to lift, for example, and where the handle for advancing the film was initially hand turned. Certainly early attempts were relatively crude: in *Walk in the Night* the camera travels with the protagonists in a car, for instance, and in *Die Finanzen des Herzogs/The Finances of the Duke* (1923) a rowing boat is the means of transport.⁵ But by the time Murnau came to shoot *The Last Laugh* he already considered such sequences primitive by the standards he (or rather, his imagination) aspired to: he wanted real movement, movement which would astound audiences and, crucially, would contribute to stories which were increasingly foregoing the use of what he regarded as clumsy intertitles to keep the audience abreast of narratorial developments. For the opening sequence of *The Last Laugh* shooting was straightforward enough. Operated by his long-term cameraman Karl Freund, the camera is mounted on a bicycle which descends into the hotel lobby in an elevator, before crossing the busy lobby floor and gliding out to the street where we see the porter for the first time. Similar techniques allow the camera to cross busy roads (at one point we even see the tyre tracks of the cart upon which the camera is mounted, left in the dirt on the road). Later, the moment of the porter's misery combines several techniques, so that a zoom shot (achieved by physically pushing the camera forward), followed by a dissolve, allows the camera apparently to pass through the glass doors of the hotel manager's office. The letter informing the porter of his demotion is literally 'read' by the camera tracking across the letter in close-up in what is effectively the only intertitle of the film,⁶ whilst a small iris blend within the main image reveals the fate of the previous doorkeeper to suffer humiliating demotion to cloakroom attendant. So far, so good: these are prime examples of Murnau's craft, but they are merely the result of the consummate blending of existing techniques. Murnau wanted more.

For two shots in particular Murnau collaborated closely with cameraman Karl Freund to free the camera completely from its cumbersome apparatus. First they built a frame to allow the camera to be mounted on Freund's chest so that he could walk amongst the actors, filming as he went. And then, in a famous sequence where the sound of a trumpet is represented by the camera pulling away from the instrument and up into the air, Murnau and Freund built a cage and pulley system which allowed the camera to glide from the very top of the set at Babelsberg down to the trumpet itself. Once the shot was complete it would be reversed to achieve the desired visual effect. This was then repeated in another sequence where women's gossip is seen to float from one balcony to another as news of the porter's demotion (and deceit) spreads around his tenement building. American observers of the film were simply astounded by the nature of the images Murnau and his team were producing, as set-builder Robert Herth recalled.

After the the first showing of *The Last Laugh* [. . .] there was a telegram from Hollywood addressed to Ufa, asking what camera we had used to shoot the film. It added that in the United States there was no such

camera, and no town to compare with the one in our film. The Americans, used to a precise technique, didn't dream that we had discovered new methods with only the most primitive means at our disposal (Eisner 1973: 67).

Likewise, in *Faust*, the hero's flight over the rooftops of the town, in the company of the devil, required several innovative devices in quick succession: an elaborate roller-coaster framework along which the camera could be pushed, dissolves and blends, shots involving different scales of models, forced perspectives and so on. On many occasions members of Murnau's team recalled with great affection the fastidious way that the director would discuss the scenes with each expert until he was satisfied that together they had achieved the shot as he had envisaged. As Herlth put it: 'Murnau was a "Raphael without hands", knew [what] it was possible to achieve. And all that was done simply because he insisted on it, and because he stimulated us into being capable of it' (Eisner 1973: 68). With such innovation, which required a fantastic imagination, if not to say genius, Murnau tapped into what Klaus Kreimeier once called 'the magical kitchen of Ufa' (Kreimeier 1992: 124).⁷ Hollywood, fearing that it could not match this wave of innovation, chose to compete in the only way it knew: with money.

When Murnau had visited America in 1924, before *The Last Laugh* had achieved its success on that side of the Atlantic, little notice was taken of his presence. But Murnau himself must have been impressed by the land which seemed to promise so much to someone as rootless as he. By the time of the gala premiere of *Faust* in Berlin the lure of Hollywood had proved too great for Murnau. William Fox enticed him to America with the promise of an unlimited budget and total artistic freedom. Murnau signed a contract with Fox on 8 July 1926, and immediately set about his work: the result was *Sunrise*. Subtitled *A Song of Two Humans*, this film stands as the apotheosis of everything that was fresh and innovative about Murnau's approach to filmmaking. He himself declared *Sunrise* his crowning achievement.

The theme itself is reassuringly familiar: the love of a young farming couple is destroyed by the murderous intent of a lascivious city vamp – in terms of a destabilising threat, a synthesis of the dancer in *Walk in the Night* and the vampire in *Nosferatu*, perhaps. The husband's affection for his wife is then rekindled during a trip to the city together. As they return home across a lake a storm swamps their boat. The husband fears he has lost his bride, and rejects the vamp's renewed advances, before learning that his wife did not, after all, drown. The happy end, the restoration of equilibrium, is achieved (even if it appears as transient as in Murnau's earlier films). Likewise, there is nothing new about the techniques employed by Murnau to underpin the story. Ironically, its relatively poor performance at the box office meant that he never again enjoyed such financial or creative freedom, but the film and the actors in it were rewarded with four academy awards in 1931, including one unique award

7 Ufa was, of course, Germany's premier film studio, dominating the industry in terms of production and distribution, and the only German studio seriously to attempt to break into the lucrative US market. Kreimeier goes on to highlight the 'collaboration of technology and fantasy' behind much of Ufa's Golden Era, and likens the process to that of the alchemist driven to create gold (Kreimeier 1992: 124).

for contribution to artistic endeavour which has never been awarded since. For many critics then and today, *Sunrise* is simply the perfect film, where every element combines to tell the story of a paradise lost, regained and then nearly lost again for ever. Even modern directors such as Germany's current film *Wunderkind* Tom Tykwer are quick to acknowledge its perfection: '*Sunrise* – like most of Murnau's best works – is a filmic dream [. . .]. The film virtually bursts at the seams with visualised fantasy' (Prinzler 2003: 199–201). As such, Murnau's contribution (along with Lang, Pabst and the many actors, set designers and cameramen who emigrated to the United States in the 1930s) meant that Hollywood film was changed for ever.

Tragically, Murnau's true impact on global cinema can only partially be assessed because his career was cut short by his untimely death. In a ghoulish fulfilment of the curse inflicted upon him for breaking religious edicts during the filming of *Tabu*, he was to die before that film's premiere. On 11 March 1931 Murnau was on his way from Hollywood to Monterey in California. Although the exact sequence of events is hazy, it seems certain that Murnau allowed his young Phillipino companion Garcia Stevenson to drive the limousine they were in. Stevenson, who had not driven before, panicked when faced by oncoming traffic and crashed the car. While the other occupants of the car walked away unscathed, Murnau suffered serious head injuries and died at home shortly afterwards, aged 43.

When Charlie Chaplin, who was touring Germany in the March of that year, was informed of Murnau's death, he is reported to have said: 'He is the best man Germany ever sent to Hollywood. I still cannot grasp such awful news' (Prinzler 2003: 7). Likewise, Fritz Lang in his oratory speech at Murnau's funeral in Stahndorf, Berlin, said: 'In future decades people will come to realise that a pioneer has left us in the midst of his creativity, one to whom film can be thankful that he has given it its very foundations, both in an artistic as well as a technical sense. [. . .] His entire work was ballads in pictures' (Becker and Albrecht 1981: 110–11). Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau was at once a pioneer, yet at the same time he was a master of his medium who has rarely been rivalled since. Faced with a burning conviction that film was the natural successor to theatre, driven by a narrative talent, and inspired by an innovative genius, he became a worthy member of the pantheon of filmmakers who established cinema as both artistic endeavour and entertainment industry, on both sides of the Atlantic. Without him, the course of European film, and indeed the course of American film, would have been very different. Lotte Eisner summed up Murnau's talent: 'In Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, the greatest film-director the Germans have ever known, cinematic composition was never a mere attempt at decorative stylization. He created the most overwhelming and poignant images in the whole German cinema' (Eisner 1969: 97). Whilst it might be true to say that Murnau was a transcendental vagrant, it is our good fortune that his true home was in film.

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